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A CHILD OF NATURE.

A Romance.

BY
ROBERT BUCHANAN,
AUTHOR OF 'THE SHADOW OF THE SWORD.'

IN THREE VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

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A CHILD OF NATURE.



CHAPTER I.

ONE WHITE SAIL IN A WASTE OF GREY.

IN the afternoon of a summer day, a small schooner yacht, closely reefed, made her appearance off the mouth of Loch Uribol, a long and lonely sea fjord in the remote North of Scotland, and while beating to and fro in the open sea, in the midst of the southerly squalls from the neighbouring mountains, hoisted the inverted red flag to the fore-

mast, as a signal that the parties on board were in need of assistance.

It had been a dark, dry day, with the wind blowing fresh from the south-east very steady and strong, and the yacht, a tiny thing of fifteen or sixteen tons, with a small cockpit, had beaten round Cape Wrath at early dawn, across the tossing waters which divide the dark, serrated peaks of Scotland from the far-off Norwegian shores. Lightly as a bird she had bounded over the great rollers of the sea, splashing the foam over herself from stem to stern, but seldom taking on board a drop of 'green.' The wind was almost steady ahead, so that her progress eastward was slow indeed.

The time slipt by, however. The gloomy crags of the wild North Cape grew fainter and fainter, and the shores of the northern coast, which at first had been scarcely

distinguishable on the horizon, gradually loomed more and more distinct—stretching in one desolate and lonely direction from the high hills of Ben Derg past the faint, low-lying flats of Roan to the dark and rocky shores which fringe the cliffs of Tongue. Not once in the long day had the sun actually made his appearance. The atmosphere had been full of a palpitating silver light, in which the skies seemed close to the earth and very grey, and the waves of the sea, where they did not break into white foam, unusually black and sinister-looking.

Yet it was ‘good weather,’ a safe, snug day for sailing, and the sombre, colourless tone of all things—sea, far-off land, and sky—was not without its charms for those who have learned to love the pathetic ‘neutral tint’ of the melancholy northern coast.

But as evening approached the sun looked out from a grey chasm above the outlying hills, and shed a lurid light over the dancing sea, illumining to rose-colour the white sails of the little yacht, which was now within a few miles of the dangerous coast. Just about this time a weather-beaten West Highlander, who was steering the little vessel, cocked his eye up to the sunset, and, relinquishing the tiller to a young man who sat in the cockpit beside him, said quietly:

‘She’s going to give a puff out o’ the east yonder, and Loch Uribol’s a terrible place for squalls. We’ll take off the fore-sail altogether, and let her sail cannie wi’ mainsail, staysail, and jib.’

Scarcely had the speaker, with the assistance of another man who had been lying listlessly in the fore-part of the vessel, carried out his precaution, and taken the

foresail down, when the first squall from the land came up white as foam, and laid the vessel over to the coming of the cockpit.

Squall after squall followed, while the light from the sunset grew every moment of a more lurid crimson, and the wind streamed out of a great rent in the vast mountains of cloud to the south-east. The yacht was too lightly ballasted to carry her canvas well, and more than once the wind struck her so savagely as to threaten to founder her outright, the water passing along the lee decks in one green torrent, and drenching the helmsman to the skin. The sea was comparatively smooth, however, owing to the shelter of the hills.

From the dark precipices and distant misty glens the gusts shot out with a force only realisable by him who has navigated these coasts in a small vessel. With the

fury of hate and the strength of despair, so to speak, they plunged one by one upon the schooner, like wild beasts frantically endeavouring to tear her to pieces.

With a light laugh, the helmsman dashed the wet hair out of his eyes, and strained his gaze towards the land.

‘Which is the Uribol land?’ he cried to the old Celt who had first spoken. ‘Can you make out the mouth of the loch?’

The old man shook his head.

‘I know fine she lies somewhere in yonder,’ he said; ‘but I’ve never passed the mouth. Luff, sir, luff! We’ll put about directly—there’s a nasty bit o’ water fair ahead.’

The young man uttered an exclamation expressive of impatience.

‘Here, Calum, take the helm, and let me have a look at the chart.’

So saying, he again resigned the tiller to the old man, and plunging down the 'companion' to the cabin, soon re-emerged with the Government chart of the coast in his hand. Spreading it out on the 'coach roof,' and following the marks with his finger, he studied it attentively, now and then glancing at the land, while the yacht, having put about, was dashing along through squall after squall, and coming nearer and nearer to the shore.

He was a man of eight or nine and twenty, with a rather handsome style of face—broad high brow, a nose of the so-called Grecian sort, and a proud, sarcastic mouth. His skin was dark and tanned, as if he had lived long in the sun of warmer climates. He was clean shaven, all save the upper lip, where he wore a thick, flossy moustache, very fair in colour. His eyes were blue and very large, though he had

a habit of contracting them very much when he was looking at any person. In his whole person, and in every gesture, there was a certain air which bespoke the gentleman by birth. His expression, nevertheless, was marred by audacity and superciliousness, and his laugh had not the ringing clearness of youth, but sounded hollow at times, with a sort of spasmodic gaiety his face did not share.

As he studied the mysterious lines of the chart his face grew very black.

‘Why the devil did I come here without a pilot?’ he exclaimed. ‘Look here, Calum. The mouth of the loch is full of sunken rocks in every direction. Far out to the right hand there’s Bo Scarbh, a regular reef, three feet under water at high springs; close by—see! there’s another—Bo Something else; and then there’s half-a-dozen rocks peppered *here*, and another half-dozen

there. To crown all, there's only six feet at low water in the deepest part of the channel, although we are drawing seven feet aft; and, by George! the channel itself at the Narrows is about two cables' length across. It would be certain shipwreck to enter without a pilot. What are we to do?'

It was in answer to this question that Calum recommended that they should signal to the shore for a pilot; and so the little yacht was kept running to and fro on the wind just off the shore. On coming thus close in under the mountains, they could just distinguish, about a mile ahead, the silvern gleam of the mouth of the loch, and, seen from afar, it looked very narrow indeed—only a few yards across. Just inside, as they knew, there was good anchorage in a small snug basin nearly opposite the 'village.'

An hour of great excitement passed, and

there was no answer to their signal from the shore. Every instant the squalls grew more terrific, till it seemed the little vessel must be lost indeed. Worst of all, night was near ; the hills were already growing dim.

‘It’s an awfu’ coast,’ said Calum, reflectively, as he shook the boat through a violent squall. ‘I mind once of a hooker of a hundred tons being clean foundered just off here. And there wasna any sea ; she was running for the south with herring, and had twa or three empty barrels on her deck ; and the wind came aff yonder hill and sank her as ye’d sink a spoon in a bowl o’ milk. I wouldna’ sail an open boat here for a heap o’ money.’

‘No one appears to take any notice of us,’ cried the young man. ‘Wnat is to be done ? The boat won’t stand much more squall.’

‘The boat’s a good boat,’ said Calum, ‘but the nicht’s going to be bad; and nae yacht o’ this size can live if it comes on a gale. If nae man comes off from the shore, we’ll have to run for Loch Uish, straight down the coast. It’s no a cannie run in the dark, for there’s the Mackenzie Rock, and the reef where Sandie Gow lost the *Spell*; and forbye that, there’s the Black Rocks; but we’ll dae our best.’

‘Humph! then it’s only a chance that we get clear out of this confounded mess?’

‘Oh ay, just a chance,’ said Calum, dryly. ‘The folk’ll be awa’ at the fishing, and it’s a bad nicht for a boat like this in the open.’

Something in the perfectly unmoved and phlegmatic tone of the speaker took the other’s attention, for the young man stared at him for some time with a half-comic, half-sneering look of astonishment; and

seeing the grim, weather-beaten features perfectly unmoved, he broke into a hard laugh.

‘ You take it coolly enough, at any rate,’ he cried.

‘ And what for should I no tak’ it coolly?’ I’m only a common man, and maun tak’ the winds as they come, an’ earn my bread.’

‘ Can you swim ?’

‘ Not a stroke,’ replied Calum, burying his face in his hands to light his black cutty pipe, while the man at the fore-part of the vessel, reclining against the bitts, hummed in a low voice the doleful lively ditty of ‘ Ghillie Callum.’

Still finding secret amusement in the stolidity of his companions, the young man laughed again; then, entering the cabin once more, he re-emerged with a fowling-piece, and fired two shots rapidly into the

air. Scarcely had he done so, when an enormous black dog sprang up the companion, and, rushing to the bulwarks, gazed eagerly out on the waters.

‘Down, Nero, down!’ cried the young man. ‘He thinks I have shot something. Ha! the noise seems to have attracted attention at last. Look yonder!’

On a small eminence overlooking the entrance of the loch two or three figures were now dimly seen; but it was already too dark to make out who and what they were. The twilight had quite fallen, and the wind was rising with great fury.

‘Hang off ten minutes longer,’ the young man said, ‘and then, if no one comes, we must risk the run back again along the coast.’

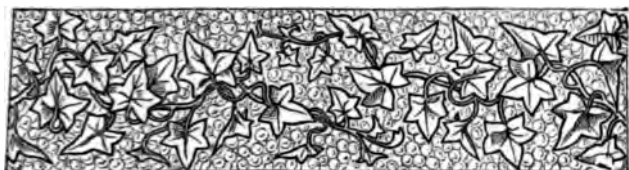
The helmsman nodded, ‘put about’ once more, and ran through the wind. The squalls could still be seen whitening the

sea to windward when they struck the water; but every minute the coast grew dimmer, so that only a very familiar eye could have made out the landmarks.

Ten minutes passed, and the order was already given to let the vessel run with a free sheet, when Calum, knocking the ashes of his pipe out into the water to leeward, said quietly :

‘ Wheest a minute! I hear the sound of oars between us and the shore.’





CHAPTER II.

THE FAIR PILOT.

LISTENING intensely all could hear the splash, splash of oars coming nearer and nearer. Immediately afterwards a small boat, rowed by a solitary figure, shot out of the shadow of the hills.

It seemed to be a rude coble, quite at the mercy of the wind, but very skilfully managed. While Calum brought the boat up to the wind, the young man leant over the side of the vessel and regarded the small boat intently. Presently he uttered an exclamation which bore a suspicious

resemblance to an oath, and turned angrily to Calum.

‘Look there! Confound the idiots! They’ve sent out a *woman*.’

Calum, who was quite as astonished, but exhibited more self-control, nodded sharply.

The boat was indeed rowed by a female, to all appearances strong and young, but her head was covered by a dark hood, and they could not see her face.

Angrily enough Calum addressed the stranger in Gaelic. He was answered in clear ringing tones, in the same tongue; and almost before he could say another word the coble was alongside the yacht, and a light girlish figure, with a speed and agility perfectly marvellous to the Southerner, had sprung on board. -\

It was too dark to distinguish her features plainly, but she seemed fair-complexioned and very young. Her hood had

fallen back, and her face and hair were damp with spray. Perfectly lost in amazement at so strange an apparition, the young man stood staring open-mouthed, while the stranger and Calum spoke to each other rapidly in Gaelic.

‘What does the girl say?’ he at last inquired impatiently. ‘Is anyone coming off to pilot us into the anchorage?’

Calum replied in the methodical way peculiar to him and to his class :

‘The lassie says there’s no a man in the village this night that can pull an oar or draw a net. The whole village is awa’ after the herring at Loch Uish, and there’s naething left but wives, bairns, and old bed-ridden men.’

A furious squall struck the yacht as the fisherman spoke, and almost capsized her, for she had entirely lost way through being brought up to the wind. Again addressing

Calum rapidly in Gaelic, the girl pushed him aside and seized the tiller.

‘Hullo! what are you doing?’ cried the young man. ‘You’re never going to trust the boat to a girl like that?’

The girl seemed either to understand what was said, or guessed at the meaning, for she laughed. By this time the yacht was again running rapidly through the water, steered by the stranger.

‘The lassie says,’ observed Calum, phlegmatically, ‘that there’s no better pilot in the place than hersel’; and if we leave the boat to her, she’ll take us in all snug. The tide’s at the flood, she says, and we’ll hae plenty o’ water at the Narrows.’

‘But it’s nearly pitch-dark, and this is a mere child.’

‘Never you fear, sir. See that! She kens how to steer a boat; and take my

word for it, she'll take us safe. I've had worse pilots than this before now. She's a bold lass, and a cannie, and better than many men.'

A loud cry from the girl interrupted him. She seemed giving instructions in her own tongue. In a moment he ran forward to assist the other hand with the sheets, while the girl brought the vessel round just a few feet from a large black mass projecting out of the sea.

'That's close work,' cried the gentleman, nervously. 'I'm afraid we'll come to grief.'

The girl spoke again to Calum, and he interpreted.

'That's Dhu Scur, she says. But there's three fathom water to the very edge of the reef. We're coming up to the Narrows now, and need every inch o' room.'

Another cry from the girl, and the vessel was round again on another tack. They were now quite in the shadow of the hills, and all seemed darkness and confusion, especially to the unaccustomed senses of the young man. To him the land seemed closing in on every side, the mountains towering straight above, the wind coming in all directions. A wild roar was in the air, and the water seemed swirling and boiling below them with an angry roar.

‘We’re in the Narrows now,’ cried Calum ;
‘that’s the boiling o’ the tide.’

The wind was sweeping dead out of the mouth of the loch, and again and again the vessel put about—so rapidly indeed that she scarcely got way upon her on one tack before she had to come round again. Once, for this reason, she refused altogether to answer the helm in coming round, and seemed drifting right on the rocks of the

channel; but in a moment, urged by the girl, Calum boomed out the staysail to windward with an oar, and the vessel slowly completed her swing out. All seemed to grow darker and darker after this, for they had got more and more in the shadow of the hills; but by-and-by the young man saw that they had emerged into more open water, and that several lights, like those of a village, were glimmering from the darkness of the shore. The wind still shrieked loudly.

‘All’s safe now, sir,’ said Calum. ‘We’re close to the anchorage, oot o’ a’ danger.’

So saying he ran forward and assisted his fellow-seaman to haul up the chain on deck, that it might run free, and to hoist the anchor over the bows. A minute afterwards the vessel was brought up to the wind, and glided steadily along through smooth water for about a hundred yards, when the girl

cried out to the men forward, and released her hold of the tiller.

The yacht was quite stationary. Down went the anchor, with that delicious sound which only the weary cruiser knows and loves. For some minutes there was confusion in the darkness. The young man went forward to see all snug, and to take a look about him. So far as he could make out in the night, they were in a nice natural harbour, surrounded on every side by hills, and sheltered almost entirely from the wind then blowing.

‘Five fathom water,’ said Calum, hauling in the lead-line; ‘and a fine soft mud for the bottom. We couldn’t be in a snugger berth.’

The young man, who had been plunged in deep reflection, touched him on the shoulder.

‘Come aft with me, and speak to the girl.

In all probability she has saved our lives.'

But when they went in search of her she had disappeared, and the old coble in which she had rowed out to their assistance had disappeared also. They strained their eyes into the surrounding darkness, and listened for the sound of oars; but all was quite still, and they could not see a glimpse of the stranger.





CHAPTER III.

AN OLD LETTER.

‘OU will perceive from the superscription and postmark of this letter that I have at last arrived at Ultima Thule. I bought a clipping little yacht, bran-new, for three hundred and fifty pounds, fitted her up snugly in the Clyde, and worked my way slowly up here with a crew of two—one of them an old fisherman, who knows this coast as well as the lines of his mother’s face. On the way we put in at Iona, and were nearly blown to bits in Loch Scavaig, Skye. From the last-named

place we sailed round Cape Wrath, and arrived off Uribol on the afternoon of the 5th. The whole journey was great fun, though I missed the comforts of the dinner-table. What I had in the way of food had to be cooked by myself, for I could not have trusted either of the men to cook for me ; so I contented myself with boiled eggs, hard biscuits, a little fish occasionally, tea and coffee made over the spirit-lamp, and any number of cigars ! I took a couple of dozen of claret aboard in the Clyde, but it vanished in no time, and since then I've been sticking to the national liquor, and really find it agrees with me exceedingly. The *modus bibendi* is to throw back your head, and pour a glass of plain whisky down at one draught, and then, with watering eyes and burning throat, to chuck approval in a certain indescribable way, by sticking the tongue against the roof of the mouth.

‘The climate is detestable, and tries even my temper. Since I began to sail on this coast I have scarcely seen my old friend the sun ; all is grey, melancholy, dark, and though there has not been a great deal of actually heavy rain, the Scotch mist—which means an insidious dew-fall, turning your clothes into a wet blanket—has been perpetual. One scarcely wonders that the population is so small, when the cheerlessness of all things is taken into consideration. For my part, I can’t understand how people can exist for a lifetime in so cool a temperature. Although I am a Scotchman by birth, my blood runs freer in southern latitudes than here. If I stopped here long, I should become as reserved, as phlegmatic, and as superstitious as the natives.

‘And yet, for all that, don’t run away with the impression that I am disappointed. These weird, grey solitudes and lonely seas

impressed me more than you can conceive, just as some old engravings, with their one sombre hue, haunt the imagination even more than the finest pictures. I have washed in two or three sketches in Indian ink—one of Loch Scavaig, another of the heads of Sutherland, etc., and really they seem strangely to reproduce this landscape without a tint of colour. Still, when you look closely into the tints of hill, lake, and sea, there is colour of the most subtle sort. I never knew how many different greys there were till I made this journey; their combinations are most extraordinary, and (in the artistic sense) most pathetic.

‘I have travelled far, as you know, but never, either on the American prairie, or in the Canadian backwoods, on the old continent, or on the new, did I find more perfect loveliness than surrounds me here. Few vessels navigate the seas, the inhabitants of

the north are few and far between, and the whole prospect seems ages back in time. A letter from the remotest capital of Europe would reach you sooner than this will, though I am only about five hundred miles away as the crow flies, and this will be carried over waters as dangerous to the frail craft which navigates them as the Pacific waters are to the great mail steamers. In fact, Livingstone in Africa is not further removed from civilisation than I am at this moment ! Yes, I am wandering like a lonely traveller indeed. My object you know ; I need not allude to it here. All around me is strange—landscape, manners and customs, language. My old pilot is the only man who can speak a word of English.

‘I fancy I can see you shrugging your shoulders with pity as you think of my forlorn condition, and hasten to flirt away the

afternoon in roseate delight at the feet of a certain dark-haired and elegantly-attired young lady with luxurious eyes. "Poor devil!" I hear you cry, "not even a pretty woman to talk to." Not so fast, however; don't talk to me of your languid drawing-room beauties, your dainty dreamers over the last new poem, your conventional dolls that melt like wax in the sun of life, and only smile in the gaslight. Give me rather the mild beauty of the American plains, adorable, refusing nothing, and demanding nothing; or the antelope-like maiden, so to speak, of southern latitudes. Give me rather some humble fisher maiden, light, fresh, unsophisticated, graceful as a fawn, and blooming as a rose!

'Here I seem to hear your cynic laugh. "Yes," you say, "the conventional creature of third-rate poems and novels; but I, who am acquainted pretty well with the lower

orders, have never stumbled across the sylph-like being. Fisher maidens, even at Newhaven, where they bloom the best, have ugly feet, hard hands, shapely bodies, coarse features, and unclean tongues." And, speaking generally, I believe you are right. Beauty does not improve with rough labour or with utter idleness, any more than the mind brightens with the ordinary conventional cramming at college. Beauty, modesty, and grace are rare in low life—about as rare, you know, as virtue in some walks of high life—still, they do exist. Here and there in my short pilgrimage I have come across some flower of wondrous loveliness, some perfect specimen of uncultivated nature, all the more dazzling from the low and seemingly barren soil in which it grew.

‘I know you are pricking up your ears now. You are right. I have discovered a

Phoenix, or something of the sort. It began in the most romantic way, as you shall hear.

‘On the afternoon of the 5th, as I mentioned above, we arrived off this coast—wind, very stiff—squalls, dreadful—night coming fast on us, and the sea all round us sown with sunken rocks. The mouth of Loch Uribol is very dangerous, and I had relied on getting a pilot from the shore to take me to the anchorage. We signalled again and again in the midst of the peppering wind, but not a soul came to our assistance. Twilight fell, and we were about to run for it when Providence intervened, and sent us a deliverer in the shape of a young native.

‘Guess my astonishment when a girl, still in her teens, rowed up to the yacht’s side, jumped on board without so much as “by your leave,” and actually took com-

mand of the vessel under my very nose, giving her orders in a strange tongue, and being obeyed by my mutinous crew as if she were some spirit from another sphere. I was simply fossilised, with my eyes on the apparition. It would be quite in vain to explain what followed, unless you had a chart of Loch Uribol before you, and knew all the dangers of the passage. Enough to say, that the young girl of whom I speak, with a nautical skill that elicited my warmest admiration, took us through every danger in safety, and deposited the whole vessel, cargo, and crew at the proper anchorage inside the loch.

‘So far, so good ; but I know the question on the tip of your tongue is the old one, ‘Was the girl good-looking?’ and should I answer in the negative, I see all your interest in this narrative vanish like smoke. So superficial are men, so credulous of the

impression which is only skin deep. Let me tell you, however, for your satisfaction, that this young creature seemed not only good-looking, but positively pretty ; and not only brave as an eagle, but elegant as a wild swan. I am speaking now merely from a first impression, and possibly she would appear very different in broad-day. In the dusk of the hills that night she seemed of almost unearthly loveliness.

‘Conceive the situation! A stormy night—a vessel in distress—dangers on every side—and the apparition of a spirit, such as might have come to Ulysses in the old days, when there were fair spirits in the sea. The whole thing seemed unreal—a picture remembered out of Byron, or one of the “*Sturm und Drang*” German novelists. All I could do was smoke like—like blazes, and, standing upright in the cockpit, stare like a great goose at our angel of deliverance.

‘Of course, if I had been able to talk Gaelic, I might have opened a conversation. I never in my life so regretted my ignorance. I rather fancy, however, she understood my English to a certain extent, for she laughed at some of my remarks to the pilot. On the whole, however, she seemed to treat me as a person of very small account indeed, addressing herself entirely to old Calum, and taking command of my vessel as if I were a person of no importance whatever.

‘I mean to paint a picture of the whole thing some day, when I get more skill in colour.

‘With the wind blowing in her face and slightly dishevelling her hair, her neck arched forward like a swan’s to point the eager head, while her eyes peered forward into the darkness, she stood in the boat’s cockpit, clenching the tiller with one hand, and slightly pressing it with her side. The

whole look and gesture was magnificent, and I could not help enjoying it, though I expected every moment we should go to smash. Then her quick bird-like cries to the man, making the air ring! I thought the Gaelic language very ugly before I heard this girl talk ; but she speaks it softly though very clearly, without the offensive guttural tones of the ordinary natives.

‘ At one moment she put me in mind of some beautiful sea-bird darting its head this way and that, and uttering its weird cry ; at another moment, when she was just about to put down the helm, and bring the boat off some critical corner, the creature looked like marble, so fixed and moveless did the whole figure become till the danger was over ; and sometimes, especially when she was offering some explanation to Calum, she resembled one of the sea-nymphs of old, sparkling, and trembling with the foam.

‘Such, I say, was my impression. Against the romance of my description you have to set the particular facts—that my imagination was greatly excited by the lonely coast and the special danger, and that it was not light enough for anything like a thorough criticism. So uncertain am I as to details that I would not even swear an oath to the colour of her hair or eyes, nor to her attire. As well as I can remember she wore, in addition to a dark hood hastily thrown on, only a gown of blue serge or wool, and a short white jacket reaching to the waist, such as you have seen in pictures of Scottish milkmaids.

‘You will wonder that I have not since taken care to solve all doubts as to the fair creature’s personal appearance. Well, the fact is, my adventure ended as mysteriously as it began. Scarcely had we arrived in safety at the anchorage when we missed the

stranger. She had taken advantage of the darkness and confusion, and rowed away before I could thank her for having preserved us, or offer her, as of course I was bound to offer her (for the girl is obviously poor), any reward or remuneration. The most extraordinary part of the whole affair is the girl's indifference in the last respect. In this country no one does you a special service without expecting to be paid for it.

‘ Confess at least that the whole adventure was very singular.

‘ With my head in a whirl I returned to my cabin, smoked any number of cigars, and saw the face of the girl before me in the smoke, while the wind ever and anon whistled in the rigging to remind me of the peril we had passed. At last, worn out with fatigue, I dropt to sleep, and had all sorts of wild dreams in which my deliverer figured. In company with her I went

through innumerable dangers. Sometimes she was an Indian, naked to the waist, paddling to my rescue as I kicked on some wild American lake. At others she was seated before me on a fleet mustang, and we were galloping away for life pursued by a murderous crowd. I mingled her up with all the scenes of my past life and all the nonsense of my past reading. Of course, in my dreams, I was rapturously in love with her, having no earthly consideration but the pleasure of my own passion.

‘When I went on deck in the morning I seemed to be in fairyland altogether. It was a dead-calm summer’s morning, and every feature of the hills was mirrored in the glassy water. Our yacht was in a small bay, floating with her sails hoisted up to dry, and her image trembling in the mirror below her. Land stretched on every side, very green and undulating, rising

into crags of ashened grey stone and purple heather, and far above the yacht towered Ben Eval, a wild, serrated peak, over which an eagle poised, dwarfed by distance to a speck.

‘A couple of hundred yards from our anchorage was a pretty beach of white sand, and just above clustered the “village,” if I may dignify it by that title. Picture to yourself a great mass of gigantic boulders, deep heather and greensward, broken here and there by a whiff of blue smoke, issuing apparently from holes in the earth or fires kindled among the crags. As the eye became more accustomed to the colour of the scene, I perceived that certain brown and green excrescences, not unlike beavers’ houses, were the huts of the population ; but they were very low on the ground, and heather, grass, and wild leek grew on the roofs, while here and there a goat was

browsing close to the hole whence the smoke issued, so that an inexperienced person might well be excused for not being able to pick them out at first sight. There were two or three dozen in number, each one built of rough stones or turfs, and roofed with straw, and not one less earth-looking and smoke-begrimed than its neighbour. Such habitations are worthy of troglodyte savages in the African wilds.

‘The skiffs had come in from the fishing and were drawn up on the white sands, while the nets were drying on the beach. A group of wild-looking barbarians stood clustering on the beach staring at the yacht, and I almost felt I must be among the Pacific Islands, and regretted I had not brought a stock of beads and brass rings to barter with the population.

‘After breakfast I went ashore, taking Calum with me as my interpreter. The

spectacle of a visitor seemed to awaken the utmost astonishment, such another event scarcely having taken place within the memory of man. The savages were friendly enough, but clustered round me rather impertinently, scrutinising my face, hands, and attire, from my wide-awake hat to my boots, with every symptom of astonishment and interest. From the general indications around me, I should infer that their wonder arose chiefly from seeing for the first time a man who washed himself; for I am given to understand that soap is unknown, and that the only towel in the island has been used to patch the mainsail of the fishing-smack which carries the herring to the Kyle of Tongue.

‘The more barbaric the population seemed the more ethereal grew the vision of the previous night—the one was a dark background to set off the beauty of the other.

In answer to my questions, put through Calum, the men shook their heads and gave me little information. I gathered, however, that the young girl was not a native of the village, but resided some distance up the interior, whither she had indeed taken her departure the night before.

“From what the pair silly bodies tell me,” said Calum, “the lassie seems a bit wrong in the head, and to be not quite cannie. They call her in Gaelic, *Mina nan Oran*, which means in English, Fair-Haired Mina o’ the Songs; but why they gave her any such outlandish title it beats me to tell. Anyhow, she’s a clever lassie, and a quick—worth a dozen o’ these lazy lumps of Highlandmen around her.”

‘I ought to tell you, by the way, that Calum Coll, though a Highlander himself, combines with a Lowland accent a great contempt for his northern countrymen and

the scenery amidst which they dwell. "The men won't stir themselves," he says, "and the land won't yield." He belongs to the southern isles, where things are brighter and pleasanter, crops more plentiful, and life altogether more prosperous. Calum is, indeed, a man without a bit of poetry in his composition; a most practical and uninteresting person, whose opinion on any social or æsthetic question I should be slow to accept, unbacked by any more enlightened authority. In some matters, soap and water for instance, he is not much further advanced than the people he despises so greatly.

' Little as was the information I could get, it piqued my curiosity. "Fair-haired Mina of the Songs!" The very name was poetry itself. I determined, at any expenditure of time and trouble, to know more of the girl. So far I have not succeeded in meeting her again, but, as I am in no hurry to depart

from a spot where there is such good sport to be had, I do not despair of being ultimately successful.

‘ My position here is very peculiar and very delightful. Of course I am *incog.*—not a soul in the place knowing who I am. To Calum Coll even I am Mr. Edward Lawrence, of Oxford and London, student and tourist, who has got Lord Arranmore’s permission to blaze away over the Uribol heather as long as he pleases this autumn. To-morrow week is the 12th of August, and then I shall begin, with one of the savages for a gillie, and Nero to “run up” the game in his wild way. I have not seen a grouse yet, but they tell me there are a few fine broods further inland. The whole island, however, swarms with vermin : you can’t go a dozen yards without seeing weasel or a founmart ; and as for otters, the only decent river (if river it can be called) is full of

them. Nevertheless, I am no greedy sportsman, and purpose to enjoy myself thoroughly. I have, as you know, a more serious object in visiting this locality. It was a study which devolved upon me sooner or later, and, though I shrank from it for a long time, I am now very glad it came. As the Scotch poet says—

““There are flowers about the peasant’s path
That kings might stoop to pu’.”

Not that I am so vain as to imagine myself a king in any sense, or that there are any flowers in the Hebrides! What I mean is simply this : my visit here has begun with a romance, and I look forward to more pleasure and excitement of the same sort by-and-by.’



CHAPTER IV.

MUSIC, MOONLIGHT, AND AN INVOCATION.

IT behoves us now to turn aside from the occupious and lucubrations of Mr. Edward Lawrance, and to follow for a brief space the fortunes of his unknown deliverer.

Quietly slipping over the vessel's side, and unloosening the rope of the coble, the young girl had stolen away into the darkness, not making for the shore, but rowing rapidly away in the opposite direction. When she had gone some distance she rested upon her oars and listened, and could distinctly

hear Lawrance's eager voice from the yacht, expressing wonder at her departure. After a moment's hesitation she rowed on.

Every nook and cranny of the coast seemed familiar to her. Scarcely glancing before her to notice whither she was going, she went rapidly on. The coble was ill-shapen, but small and easy to row, and the oars, though rudely made, were very light. The girl rowed with an indescribable grace and ease, and without the slightest sign that rowing was a task. Now and then she stopped, warm and breathing quickly, but the cessation seemed due more to abstraction of thought than to fatigue of body.

Presently she began to croon to herself, in a low sort of undertone, a weird Highland melody—one of those exquisitely beautiful tunes which are half a recitative and half a melody—oratory set to cadence and sparkling into music, just as a fountain tips itself

with spray. As she sang, keeping time with her oars to the melancholy burthen, the summer moon began to cast a ghostly gleam behind the mountains, and suddenly it arose above the fjord—yellow, round, and bright, suffusing the surface of the water with its rays. Through the ambient darkness glided the boat. All was still as death, save for the sound of the oar, the wild scream of the curlew flitting from one ghostly bay to another, and the faint far-off chirp of the sea-pies feeding on the black shores of the fjord.

Loch Uribol, whose lonely waters she was navigating, is one of the wildest of the strange sea-fjords which enter Scotland on the northern side—vast narrow arms of the sea, bearing in their innumerable ramifications this way and that a certain resemblance to an outspread piece of sea-tangle, the main stalk representing the main fjord, and the

numberless twisted stalks and leaves spreading to left and right representing the numberless bays, creeks, and minor fjords which spread on either side.

A boatman rowing straight to Loch Uribol, and perfectly familiar with the water, would reach the head after rowing about ten miles ; but a stranger, attempting to perform the same feat, would wander from left to right, this way and that, ever mistaking some false opening for the real passage, until he would abandon the navigation in despair.

Seen from the heights of Ben Ruadh, or the Red Hill, which rises above the fjord on the north, Loch Uribol seems a wandering arm of water, broken by innumerable points, coves, green islets, and savage rocks, and so creeping in and out of the land that its course is very difficult to distinguish from those of the many fresh-water lakes

and lakelets which surround it on every side.

Beginning on the northern coast, where it is fed by the wild waters of the north, it flows in and in, and round and round, till it comes into the very heart of the land, where it pauses, fed by a wild stream, which is fed in its turn by a deep and sullen lake of brackish water. This last lake, Loch Monadh by name, stretches on inland, then is linked by a river to a series of splendid lakes, the river winding beneath the mountains of Sutherland.

It is difficult to convey to a stranger's mind the utter loneliness and desolation of the whole landscape of which Loch Uribol forms a part. Wild weltering arms of seawater, with deep red stains and blotches of outlying weed; flat, green, unwholesome islands strewn with sickly greystone; vast stretches of low moorland, broken by white

gleams of fresh-water lochans, whence the wild sea-ducks arise with a startled cry ; larger fresh-water lochs, very shallow and black, with gigantic boulders and crags rising out of them like jagged teeth ; the higher hills, purple with heather at the base and middle, but rising abruptly into peaks of lurid granite—such are some of the features which strike the eye where nothing is seen save in detail, where there is no general effect save that of a map, or of the sea in storm as seen from a mountain. The prevailing tone of all is a dreamy grey—the grey of the rain-cloud, which, floating hither over the North Sea, breaks here into dark vapour and wreaths of wool-white mist.

All is still, solemn, colourless, save where the sun transforms all into wondrous brightness ; save where the thunderstorm bursts, with its bright purple voids and forked crimson lights ; save where the rainbow,

here glittering with all the hues of the prism, starts out of the sea like a spirit, while, as if in answer to a spell, rainbows innumerable issue out of the low-lying vapours and spread themselves glittering over the lakes. On every side stretches the ocean, with its restless voices ; to the north the North Sea ; to the far west the Atlantic Ocean, thundering on open sands as ghastly in tint as a dead man's face. The habitations of man are few, and scattered in the most lonely and unexpected recesses. At a first approach there is scarcely a sign of humanity, unless, indeed, the red-sailed fishing-skiff be crawling out to the lobster-bed in the sea, or the smoke of the heather fire be rising from the sides of the solitary hill.

Night, which beautifies and spiritualises all earthly things and scenes, is lovely on Loch Urìbol, and the wild mingled outlines

of land and water grow terribly pathetic in the silvern light of the moon and the fluttering phosphorescence of the aurora. As the girl crept along up the fjord in her boat, singing her solitary song, the prospect changed around her as in some fairy-tale. Round dusky points where the cormorants flutter their wings and preen their plumage in the moon; through shallow bays, with sandy shores, whereon the heron stalks like a ghost, knee-deep, with his black shadow in the silvern pool; where the mirrored stars were like gleams of pearls in the shimmering tide; through narrow black passages, where the sea-pigs were floundering with unearthly noises, uncertain whether to go this way or that; she went dreaming along, exhibiting no surprise at sounds and sights which would have filled any but an islander with consternation.

The dark scene around her was full of

life. A thousand sounds, hushed by day, broke the midnight stillness. The place could scarcely be called lonely, unless life itself be loneliness.

The girl rowed on, singing like one in a dream. Suddenly she paused, conscious of something dark floating behind her in the moonlight—a small black object, which oscillated like a leather bottle, and now and then disappeared with a splash. As she leant on her oars, still intoning, it came nearer, and showed the head of some animal swimming in the water.

‘Earach ! Earach !’ cried the girl.

The animal came nearer, within a few feet of the boat, and showed the head of a large seal, with eyes which attentively regarded the speaker.

‘Earach ! Earach !’ repeated the girl, in a low, coaxing voice, leaning over the side of the boat, and stretching her hand towards

the animal. Strange to say, it swam closer, uttering a low cry, and, rubbing against the side of the boat, suffered her to pass her hand again and again over its slippery head.

It was, indeed, a weird situation, and one which a stranger might readily have misinterpreted. The sight of that strange young figure in the lonely moonlight, caressing a monster of the deep, would have brought up startling memories of the wild shapes and scenes of fairy-tales. As they hovered there together they seemed two creatures of the elements : she, a fair spirit of the air, haunting the melancholy night ; it, a spirit of the deep, listening to the voice and obedient to the ministries of a superior. Seemed—nay, they were ! This wondrous world of fact is, after all, the most mystic fable of all, and two beautiful spirits *were* haunting that moonlight, call them by what names we will.

‘My poor Earach!’ said the maiden, in Gaelic, with indescribable softness and tenderness, ‘where have you been wandering, and who have been your comrades in the sea this night? Have you been chasing the herring eyle round Crag Bahn, or waiting for the salmon-trout at the foot of the green burn of the fall? It’s far from home that you wander now, Earach, and we fear some ill may come to you when you roam so long.’

Uttering a low, scarcely audible sound, expressive of pleasure, Earach, as the animal seemed to be called, looked up into Mina’s face with large, glittering, plaintive eyes, and pressed his head closer and closer against her hand, as a dog does when caressed. Then suddenly, as if seized with a frolicsome spirit, he splashed the water with his tail, swam round and round, and tried to clamber into the boat, sticking

again and again with his slippery fins against the gunwale.

‘Down, Earach, down! The night is cold, and you are wetting me to the skin. You are getting an old man now to be playing these pranks at dead of night. Wheesht! and I’ll sing to you, if you will follow quietly and in peace.’

Finding all its efforts to enter the boat in vain, Earach desisted, and Mina, again plying her oars, sang aloud, raising her voice now and filling the air with strange melody.

Still and quiet as a lamb, Earach swam along by the boat’s side, raising his head high out of the water, and rocking it from side to side as he listened. It was obvious that the music afforded the animal the most intense enjoyment. No less pleasure seemed to animate the singer. As she sang, with her eyes on her strange auditor, the soul of



music possessed her, and her heart swelled with deep rapture and love towards all the gentle dumb creatures of the earth, and through those to all her kind. She could not phrase this emotion in words, perhaps, but it filled her none the less. The night, the moonlight, the tender solitary sound—all these mysteries blended into the strangest mystery of all, a conscious human soul. Dare we affirm that they did not mingle also into the being of the dumb creature, finding there sources of spirituality it is beyond our power to reach or guess? Nay, for the seal loved the sound, and drank it in joy. When the last notes died away, Earach floated a few moments dreamily on the water, as if waiting for the song to be renewed, and then, finding all still, sank like a stone beneath the surface and reappeared no more.



CHAPTER V.

AN INTERIOR, 'IN THE DUTCH MANNER.'

THE girl now pursued her way silently and more rapidly. After proceeding about a mile further along the shores of the loch, she turned off into a narrow creek and ran the boat ashore by the side of a rude stone pier. Springing out, and fastening the rope of the boat to an iron ring, she walked rapidly off in the moonlight.

Her path lay among crags and boulders, through mossy hollows, and over the stepping-stones of a noisy burn. At last she

stood before the lighted window of a house, a two-storied edifice of stone, very superior to the usual kind of dwellings in those wilds. There was no blind to this window, and, approaching noiselessly, she looked in.

Within a large ante-room or kitchen, lit with a peat-fire burning brightly on the flagstone hearth of an enormous ingle, were gathered several figures. In a rudely carved arm-chair sat, with his back to the window, a man with hair as white as snow, and clad in a suit of black cloth of clerical cut. Close to him, on a large wooden peg, hung a broad, weather-worn wide-awake hat, in shape not unlike a Mexican sombrero, and with it, on the same peg, an enormous walking-stick, with a head in the shape of a shepherd's crook.

In the centre of the chamber a middle-aged woman sat spinning, her face brightly lit up by the fire and by the light of an old

cruise-lamp. Burning very dimly indeed, the latter swung to the rafters overhead, which age and the heat of the chamber had burnished as black as ebony. The woman's face was turned, with a sad, careworn smile, to the third member of the party, who, smoking a very black pipe, and sipping grog out of a tumbler, sat talking in the corner of the ingle.

This was a very old man indeed, if one could judge by the deeply wrinkled face and stooping form; but his eyes were so bright and black, and his mouth so lively, that he seemed the youngest member of the party. He sat in the full gleam of the light, with his face to the window, speaking rapidly, and obviously telling some story, to which the others listened in the deepest attention.

The colouring of the whole scene would have gladdened a shadow-loving painter, such as Rembrandt, or the artists of 'Dutch

interiors.' Dimly, in the fine darkness, the eye picked up one object after another. The first thing noticed was the gleam of the fire, and its reflection on the human faces ; then the great black kettle swinging over the fire, and the spinning-wheel, and the polished dishes ranged here and there on the walls ; then the black polished rafters ; and lastly, back again to the human faces, which were giving to the little *genre* picture its whole interest and meaning.

The old man spoke very rapidly, with a peculiar Highland accent, only now and then pausing to give a wheezing cough.

'The fever in every knuckle of his bones, and the dance of St. Vitus in aal his limbs ; that's what I weesh for him ; and when that day comes, may I be near to mix his pheesic and tell him of his sins. Kirsty, woman, weel may you shake your heid, for the tale's true ! Aal their beasts are seized, no to

speak of their cocks and hens and the big skeef with the new set of sails ; and them only one half-year's rent past due. Mark my words, Peter na Croiche wants the bit of land for his ain grazing, and that's why he's so hard on the M'Kinnons.'

'Peter Dougall is a hard man,' said the clergyman, who sat with his back to the window ; 'a hard man, and a curse to the poor ; but the fault is less with him than with those who make him what he is and put the mischief in his power. If the lairds came now and then to look after their own land instead of leaving it in the hands of ignorant men, whose only object it is to feather their own nests and keep their own lamps in oil, the Highlands would be better off.'

He spoke in a deep mellow voice, with a certain refinement of speech and old-fashioned dignity of manner.

‘That will ne’er tak’ place in oor day,’ returned the other ; ‘it’s the sheep and their masters, and tools of the deil like Peter na Croiche, that are turning the North into a wilderness, and shipping every brave Hie-land heart to the land of the stranger. Where I saw a hundred families forty years syne, I noo see but twa or three, and those pinched with hunger and lonesome as mountain deer ; and if God grants me anither ten years, and I can see oot of my een, there won’t be a babe to bring into the world, for no a man will be left in Uribol to father ane. Think of what I was lang syne, and look at me noo ! I began wi’ doctoring the bodies o’ men and women wi’ bringing people into the world, and helping them easily oot o’ it ; and I rode from door to door on my ain horse, and had baith my hands fu’ of pleesant work. And when the cholera passed this way in 30, had I any

rest night or day attending the sick and pulling them through? Well, here I am, seeventy years auld, and as steady at an operation as when I was twenty; and I see the waste around me, and hear the beasts howling, and if I was too prood to doctor sheep and cattle I should be starving this day. Once I could scarce rest in my bed without being knocked oot o' my first sleep. Noo I can sleep soond as long's I please. It seemed like auld times when I was knockit up the other night by Red John the herd, from Callum's fairm in the hollow; and I hurried on my claise and went alang wi' him, but it was only the brindled coo taken in labour and like to dee if I couldna help her through her trouble.'

Without pausing to listen any more the girl tapped on the pane, and gliding round to the back door, rapidly lifted the latch and entered in.

‘ You’re late, Miss Mina,’ said the woman, looking up quietly as the girl entered. ‘ The master was wondering what kept you.’

The young girl only smiled, and after shaking hands with the doctor, ran over to the white-haired clergyman in the arm-chair, leant over him, and kissed him. He looked up with a paternal nod, and put his hand on her head.

‘ Why, how’s this, my bairn?’ he said quickly ; ‘ your hair is dripping wet, and your gown seems splashed as well. What has kept you so late, and where have you been ?’

The girl did not answer, but standing before the fire, quietly undid her hair and allowed it to fall over her shoulders. As she stood there with her arms raised to gather the fallen braids, and the flush of exercise on her cheek, her full and perfect loveliness was apparent.

She was a blonde, of that faultlessly fair Scandinavian type found so seldom in the North, and by no means to be confounded with the so-called 'auburn' or red-haired type which is so common. Her face was somewhat pale for a rustic maiden, though the warm lips and clear eyes bespoke perfect health. Although her hair was almost golden-yellow and waved in wild curls, her eyebrows were quite dark and her large eyes of lustrous hazel. These eyes might fairly be called the soul of her face ; without them she would have been pleasant and pretty ; with them she was spiritual and lovely. They were steady eyes, not wild, though bright as possible ; and rather passive and dreamy than dazzling and keen. The figure of the girl was slight and tall, and gave little indication of the lissome strength she undoubtedly possessed.

The old doctor looked at her with an

admiration worthy of seven-and-twenty instead of seventy.

‘If the place was brighter than a bog, and as fu’ o’ life as it used to be,’ he remarked in English, ‘it’s later than this she would be coming hame frae a walk in the green places wi’ a lad o’ her ain; but we’ve fallen on bad times, Mina, my doo. I doot I’ll hae to mak’ an offer for you mysel’, auld as I am, and the ghost o’ what I was.’

Here the white-haired minister broke in quickly:

‘There are more ways of serving God than by marrying and giving in marriage, though to so many folk it’s the end of life—more shame to them! Come, Mina, you have not answered my questions. You have been up to Uribol?’

Mina nodded.

‘And you saw Allan na Hogh, and took him the flannel?’

‘Yes.’

‘How is he?’

‘Worse, uncle; his mother thinks it is the dropsy, and is looking every hour for Dr. John.’

‘I have told the doctor about him,’ said the minister; ‘and he will see him to-morrow. It seems a hard case, but he may come round.’

‘There’s strumous disease in the family,’ cried the doctor, sharply; ‘back to the third or fourth generation. It comes through the mither, though it never touches a hair of a woman’s heid. But I’ll do my best for the lad, and try to pu’ him through.’

After this there was a dead silence, during which the minister glanced again and again at Mina, while the old woman, who was spinning, with a very grave expression kept her eyes furtively fixed on the girl’s face. Thus silently urged, Mina told her tale—how, being in the village by accident, she saw the strange

yacht making signals of distress ; how there was not a man in the village at the time fit to be of the slightest assistance ; and how, after a great deal of hesitation, she had herself rowed out in her boat, rather than let the vessel rush into further danger.

Her narrative was received with little expression of surprise, save from the old doctor, who clapt his hands, and applauded uproariously.

‘ By the saul of my faither, but that was weel done ! ’ cried the latter. ‘ And you took her through the Nairrows safe and sound ? Oh that was goot ! And you had the helm your ain sel ’, and she never got so muckle as a scraitch, and ne’er smelt the groond ? Oh that was brave ! And a pleasure yacht, with a gentleman on boord ! And you never spoke a word but in Gaelic to the men, and they did aal you told them, withoot so muckle as a keek at the maister ?

Oh that was droll ! Did your reverence ever hear the like ?

The minister looked thoughtful.

‘A strange yacht in Loch Uribol is a wonder indeed,’ he said. ‘It is but few boats come this way on business, and none on pleasure. What sort of a person was the gentleman on board ?’

‘A young man,’ replied Mina, ‘and an Englishman, I think ; for I am sure he did not ken what I was saying, and he looked at me as if I was a wraith ; never speaking one word to me while I was on board.’

‘Did you not hear his name ?’ inquired the minister.

‘No,’ replied Mina ; ‘but I am sure he is quite a stranger.’

The doctor was still looking at the maiden in admiration.

‘And who taught you to steer a boat, Mina bawn ?’ he cried. ‘Those bits o’

fingers look fitter for sewing fine threed than gripping the tiller or pu'ing a sheet.'

Mina laughed, and looked earnestly at her uncle.

'I should be a poor fisherman's foster-daughter if I couldna guide a boat on the wind; though running before it my heart is in my mouth, ever since I put Koll Nicholson into the water when he was at the mast-head and I jibed the smack off the Moruig Dhu. It doesn't take strength to steer a boat, but a quick eye and a little practice. Koll first taught me in the skiff, holding the sheet in his hand, and running among the squalls below Ben Eval, and since that I've ne'er been afraid, in good weather.'

Here the minister broke in with decision:

'If I had my will,' he observed, 'every woman on these coasts should learn three

things—to steer, to row, and to swim. What are they fit for now, when danger comes, save to make a noise and trouble the men; yet there's nothing in handling a boat a woman can't understand as well as a man, if she tries. Look at old Jean M'Kinnon. Though she's sixty years of age she'll steer a boat and handle an oar with the best man in the parish, and she used to go every year with her man to the fishing till he was drowned at Stornoway. Not that I would have the women folk do the labour of the men folk, and desert the house, and wear the breeks altogether; but I would have them much wiser than they are in a hundred different ways.'

'True for you,' said the doctor; 'they want training; but it's the same everywhere in the world, and if a lass or wife can wash and cook, that's all to be expectit o' her, unless she's a fine leddy, and has to sit in

a drawing-room and droom awa' on the piano.'

'And there's Mina here,' continued the minister, warmly. 'Do you mean to tell me she'll make any the worse wife because she can steer if need be, and keep herself afloat in the water if she's thrown into it—as people in those parts may expect to be any day of the year? Just think yourself, doctor, and remember what sort of a child she was.'

'I ought to ken,' cried the old leech; 'for I saw her before her mither or father, and a mite she was, not much bigger than my thoomb, and as red as a lobster newly boiled. We never thought you would have leeved, Mina, my doo. You were so wee, and you kept on whining—whining day and night—as if some secret trouble was wearing you awa', and save you had the seerup you wouldna sleep a wink.'

‘She was a sickly infant,’ said the minister; ‘sickly and peevish, as you say; and she grew up into a poor frail bairn. When the time of deep trouble came, and father and mother were dead and buried, and I took her under this roof, I little thought that she would last long, though I loved her like my own. She would sit here, crouched up, looking at the fire all day long, and we had often to carry her to bed. She never seemed to care for play. Kirsty there thought there was a spell put upon her, and blamed poor old Elspeth of the Ru na Thouadh—though the Calliach was nearly dead of the palsy.’

‘Aye, aye!’ nodded the doctor, ‘I mind.’

‘Well, one day Koll Nicholson came in and saw her sitting here on the stool, poking the ashes with her crutch—for she was so weak she could scarcely walk without support. “Isn’t it a pity, now, to see

her sitting there so dull?" said Koll; "would she not take a sail with me in the skiff?" Mina look round at me, and her face was quite bright. It was a fine day, and I saw that she was keen to go. So, what did we do but carry her down, with a blanket wrapt round her, and a piece of bread and butter in her hand, and put her in Koll's skiff. Koll rowed her about for two long hours, and then he brought her back, and her eyes were as bright as they are now, and there was a spot of red on her cheek, like the press of a finger. She needed no soothing that night, but slept sound. Next day there was rain, and she sat all day looking at the fire, quite bright and pleased, and when she talked it was about the things she had seen—the big sea, the fish, the birds, all the wonders He made in the beginning. Ah, doctor, His ways are strange indeed! After that Koll came

every fine day and took her with him on the water; and the sea was good to her—better than any medicine—and every day she got stronger and better with the fresh air. And look at her now !’

‘Weel may you say sae,’ exclaimed the doctor. ‘She’s worth looking at! Mina, my bairn, I’ll trouble you for a light till my pipe.’





CHAPTER VI.

DOCTOR OF SOULS AND DOCTOR OF BODIES.

‘**S**HE’S had one doctor,’ continued the minister, thoughtfully ; ‘one doctor only, and that’s the sea, with Koll Nicholson to give the medicine! Glory be to God! His sea saved her! Was I right, or was I wrong, then, when she grew stronger and bigger, to let the sea teach her all it could, to let her spend her long days on the water, to pull herself about in the punt, to go with Koll to the fishing, to just give her the whole of the salt water’s teaching, and trust to God for the rest!’

This is a lonely place, and she's had only one playmate—Koll Nicholson ; and he has taught her some rough games—to row a boat, to steer a skiff, to reef a sail, to set a long line, to bait a lobster-pot, and to mend a net ; and Koll says she knows the loch better than he does himself. Just see the ways of the Almighty God ! He sends Koll to save the child's life, and to make her strong with the breath of the sea ; and the signs of His grace are manifold, for after she has trusted all to him, and been saved, she is made this night the instrument of saving others maybe from a watery grave. And look at her, as I told you ! Is she any the uglier, or the coarser, because she knows these things ? Does she love learning any the less, such poor learning as I can give her ?

‘Deil the bit o’ it,’ cried the doctor.
‘She reads both Latin and Gaelic at sight,

and she sings like a mavis. Long life to her! She has the whole "Birlinn"* by heart, besides some sangs of my ain that I taught her when I came last this way. Mina, have you forgotten the "Gilli Dubh" yet, or Dunacha Ban's† sang about "Mairi Bhan Og?"'

Mina did not reply, for, loath to listen any longer to her own incidental praises, she had stolen from the room, accompanied by the woman who had been spinning. The two old men thus left alone looked at each other for some time in silence, the doctor puffing vigorously at his pipe, and the minister looking dreamily into the fire.

There was silence once more, and the minister watched the old doctor somewhat impatiently, yawning once or twice as if it was time to be in bed. While they were

* A well-known Gaelic ballad-poem.

† Duncan Ban Macintyre.

sitting still in the light of the peat-fire they were a curious contrast, each showing in his peculiar way the cunning handiwork of time.

Norman Macdonald, the minister of the Established Church at Uribol, was an old man of seventy, tall almost to ungainliness, thin, gaunt, with a grave clean-shaven face, and large melancholy eyes. He had once stood nearly seven feet high in his shoes, and though his shoulders were now bent with age he still seemed of gigantic height when standing erect. He was one of those men who are only to be found in the Highlands of Scotland and some parts of Ireland—a man of the people, and yet a scholar—a clergyman, and yet no bigot—a man of the world who never penetrated beyond a barren solitude. Forty long years had he dwelt in Uribol—wifeless, almost friendless, a solitary student among a wild, untutored

race. In all seasons and in all weathers, across wild waters and over almost impassable mountains, he had carried the Word of God in faith and humility. He knew every face in the isles as a shepherd knows his sheep. He had sat for days by sick-beds prescribing both for the body and for the soul, and he had been at every death-bed like a spirit of hope and promise. He was a busy husbandman, and cultivated a small glebe with his own hands, and there was no better judge of sheep or cattle in the whole district. Unlike most of his brethren, he was a man of dreamy temperament, a great lover of nature, and a diligent observer of natural phenomena. He was a great upholder of the authenticity of Ossian, and he had contributed to the learned societies of Edinburgh, of which he was a member, many papers of strange interest on the antiquities of Sutherlandshire.

In his own conversation with the doctor, given above, the good pastor had said something of the fair girl who, although not his own child, was nevertheless a member—and the most precious member—of his little household. Mina nan Oran, as the fishermen called her on account of her singing gifts, or more properly Mina Macdonald, was the child of an only brother who had been widowed during her infancy, and had shortly afterwards died, leaving two children—Mina and a little brother just one year her senior. There seemed little prospect that Mina would live when the minister, from motives of affection, had taken the orphans into his house, and handed them over to the care of Kirsty Campbell, a widow and his maid-of-all-work, to be dealt with according to her sage experience. On first undertaking the responsibility he did not expect that it would long continue; but he speedily

began, with the extreme tenderness of his nature, to conceive a strong affection for both his charges, and to regard the little girl—especially her—as veritably the sunshine of his dwelling. Never before, since his early boyhood, when one unhappy passion had touched and darkly stained his spirit for all the coming years, had he seen any object near him which he could cherish as his own. Although his was precisely the nature for which celibacy was unfitted, he had never married; and this, perhaps, had somewhat clouded his originally gentle nature. What wonder, then, that he learned to cherish the little Mina as something sent specially by God to comfort his lonely years? As she grew up into a fair and healthy maiden, his soul yearned to her as to the child of his own loins. It was his constant care to tend her mind and open her heart; and he wisely saw that, if some-

times gently guided and warned, she would gain more from nature in mind as well as body than from all the mere routine of study. He had no false pride. He encouraged her to seek strength constantly in the open air, and to excel in outdoor sports. He never allowed her to forget that she was a poor man's child, and that her place was by the side of the poor.

He allowed all the wild superstition and mystery of the place to pass unimpeded into her soul, and to blend with her thoughts. He might smile at fairy-tale, but he well knew its gentle uses. He suffered her to learn from old men and women all the traditional poetry and romance of the isles; for he saw that these things brightened her eye and sweetened her speech, rendering her as one that talks with spirits. His own formal instruction to her was limited to teaching her to read and write in both Gaelic

and English (the former a very unusual accomplishment in the Highlands), to read a little Latin, to sing a little, and to be familiar with the Holy Book. It is to be noted that the minister troubled her little with points of doctrine, or that strangest of all mythologies concerning the lives of mediæval saints. His religious teaching was very simple, and would scarcely have been objected to by any of the many Christian sects.

Nowhere, perhaps, save in the Highlands of Scotland could a young girl so lovely and so innocent as Mina Macdonald have lived so free and irregular a life, and consorted so indifferently with all sorts of human creatures, without being warned of danger by some open insult or secret contamination. But the poor Celts of Uribol were as pure in this respect as the most perfect knights of Arthur's court. No rude

thoughts, no lewd hint or secret rudeness, either by word or by look, ever caused her to shrink within herself and long for protection. This man might drink away his substance, that man might in ordinary life be villanous in the extreme, but the wildest and most brutal revered the young maiden, and would have protected her with their lives. Day and night were alike to her; she walked about under a charm. It may be added, furthermore, that there was little crime of any kind in Uribol, and the worst crime known was petty theft. They were, for the most part, a conscientious and a gentle people, never, even in their worst specimens, immoral or unclean-minded.

Turning back from this digression to the two figures seated before the fire, let us take the present opportunity to say a few words about the doctor.

Although now so old and feeble, this

curious old man lived still in his quaint, wandering style. He could not walk far, however, and never visited the interior unless a pony was specially sent for him. However, most of his places of call were close to the sea-shore, and he was able to perform his duties tolerably, although he could drink more whisky than any man in the Highlands. Nor was his practice confined to the poor. He had a good practice among the rich lairds of the West and their ladies, and he had brought into the world many of the most distinguished people of those parts. It was usual, when a birth seemed imminent, to send for Doctor John, to lodge him in the house in readiness, and to keep him in drink and meat till the hour came; and on occasions like these he had been known to be retained, in a state of semi-intoxication, for weeks together, till the event came, when he would thrust his

hot head under the pump or into a basin, drink a draught of cold water, and be himself in a moment. Many were his droll anecdotes connected with this part of his vocation, nor did he spare his own faults in his narrations.

He was a shrewd man, full of animal spirits, and not too delicate-minded, content to take the world as he found it, and not over-much given to compassion for its griefs. Herein may be noted the special difference between him and the clergyman. The latter was by far the most intelligent man, the brighter-minded, the more emotional, yet his bright thoughts and love of nature scarcely ever found vent in words. The doctor, on the other hand, who had little real imagination and no subtlety of feeling, was a poet, and actually a very successful one, his Gaelic compositions being in high repute among the islanders, and sung at

many a feast and wedding, to the great delight of young and old. He excelled, too, in a species of composition very popular in the Highlands—a rude species of satiric chant, wherein the peculiarities and peccadilloes of a particular people were hit off with what seemed to the natives terrific humour. Woe to the man or woman who offended him, and earned the sharp lash of his satire! One poor girl, who had loved not wisely but too well, and had for some reasons awakened the doctor's special displeasure, had been so wounded by a brief composition of the bard that she fled ignominiously from the parish. It was also said that the use of the terrible scourge was to be purchased for money. Again and again was the doctor requested to 'compose a song' expressive of private contempt or hostility, and again and again he got payment in money or goods. We ought to

add that his satire was neither very brilliant nor very delicate, though smartly expressed enough. Strange to say, he made very few enemies, and his compositions were often taken in good part by the very victims themselves.

We cannot say that his influence was altogether salutary. Somehow or other, wherever he went he left a droll trail of drunkenness and disturbance. The people who sheltered him, the boatmen who ferried him, the very sick he attended, felt the wild fascination of his presence long after he had departed ; and it was not at all an uncommon explanation, when this or that person was found in drink, to say quietly, ‘ Oh, ay, he began last week, when Doctor Shon was here, and he’ll no stop noo !’

Despite all this, and despite his great age, the doctor was skilful, and the islanders believed in his skill. He was a physician

of the 'old school,' and did not excite suspicion by any alarming experiments; and, leaving a great deal of his cures to nature, he was in the majority of cases very successful.

Seated in the minister's kitchen, invariably used as a smoking-room and place of homely festivity, he smoked his pipe and blinked with his old, wrinkled, weather-beaten face at his host, until the latter, with a great yawn, rose out of his arm-chair and stood erect, his snow-white head nearly reaching to the black rafters.

'It is past midnight,' he said, 'and I must be up soon after daybreak.'

If there was one thing the doctor hated more than another, it was retiring to bed at a rational hour. Give him a drop to drink and some one to talk with—or, what was the same thing, to be talked to—and he would remain up any night till daybreak.

How his constitution endured the trials he gave it—infinite alcohol and little or no sleep—is a question not to be answered by any mere mortal. Nature sometimes makes men like him to show what she can do when she has a mind to put out her strength—veritable men of iron, on whose mighty frames disease, pain, fatigue, dissipation, make no perceptible impression.

Doctor John looked at the minister and nodded.

‘I’ll turn in when I hae smoked this pipe oot,’ he observed; ‘but let me tell you—and it’s mysel’ that speaks as a meedical man—you hae injured your health by going to bed owre early and taking too little to drink. Owre muckle sleep is doon-right ruin to the human corporation; it relaxes the humours, it spoils the circulation, and it plays the deil with the leever.’

The minister laughed.

‘And too much whisky?’

‘There your very speech is a contradiction. your reverence. You canna tak’ too much whisky in this climate, and it’s for lack o’ whisky that the population is eaten up wi’ ague, rheumatism, scurvy, and every disease that grows in a wet air and on a damp soil. Gie a poor man a glass o’ whisky and you gie him meat, drink, claise, and pheesic aal in ane. I wish I could afford it, and I’d prescribe naething but Talisker and Long John; but it’s a dear meedicine, and owre scarce among my patients, that’s the truth.’

And he looked at the minister with a droll twinkle in his eye, holding out his glass to be replenished from a black bottle in the corner. At that moment a loud sound, as of singing, was heard without, and immediately afterwards a figure passed

the window, singing aloud in a thin, sharp voice in Gaelic.

‘Wha’s that?’ cried the doctor.

‘Unless I’m very much mistaken, it’s Angus nan Choan.’

As he spoke the latch was lifted, and the door opened.

‘Peace be to aal this hoose!’ So saying the speaker entered, closing the door behind him, and reverently saluting the old clergyman.





CHAPTER VII.

ANGUS OF THE DOGS.

THE new-comer was a man of middle age, whose large, wandering eyes and unnaturally large forehead suggested weakness of intellect, and whose straight-cut, fierce mouth just as surely indicated strength of will. He was almost bald, and what hair remained to him hung in shock tangles down to his shoulders, while his long, careworn face was rendered doubly long and haggard by a pair of bushy grey whiskers. He spoke in a thin, piping voice, almost a lisp. His attitude as he

stood before the clergyman waiting for his blessing was reverent in the extreme.

If his face was strange and wild, his dress was stranger and wilder. He wore an enormous great-coat made of fustian, very loose, and reaching almost to his heels, girt around the middle by a hempen rope very frayed and black with long use. The ends of his trousers, where they peeped under the tails of his coat, were torn and ragged, and his large feet were scantily covered by a pair of blucher-boots, so worn that they hardly held together. His coat, very tight round the waist, fell open about the breast, showing that he wore neither shirt nor waistcoat, although his bosom was so covered with long matted hair as to stand in no particular need of either.

This was Angus nan Choan ; in English, Angus with the dogs.

The significance of this title became

apparent at a glance. Out of his breast were staring three little heads—those of very young Skye-terrier puppies ; and at his feet another Skye terrier, obviously the mother of the brood, was sitting in attendance, watching him with a wistful countenance.

‘Peace be to aal in this hoose,’ he exclaimed, taking off a torn Highland bonnet, and holding it in his hand.

‘And the blessing of God be upon you, Angus nan Choan,’ said the minister, gently ; ‘you are a late guest.’

Angus abandoned his reverent attitude, and answered volubly in the thin piping tones of a professional mendicant :

‘Better late than never, Mr. Macdonald, as folk say in the Sooth ; and, glory be to God, I see you stoot and strong as ever, and weel may we praise Him, for health’s a blessing. There’s Doctor Shon, tae, long life to him, and a grand man every inch o’

him, though sair on the whisky. By the saul of my faither, it's a comfort to talk again to him and you, for it's but a poor language the English, and doesna fit in right with a Hieland tongue like mine. I've wandered east and west since I last stood under this roof—may the God in heaven protect it and its owner!—and I've sairly missed the plesure of three things—the shake o' a Hielandman's fist, a bowl o' good oatmeal parritch, and the taste o' a good dram of Hieland whisky.'

He spoke with great rapidity, with a vacant face and wandering eye, yet with a certain indescribable air of cunning and lying in wait.

'Try that, Angus,' said the minister, offering him a glass of raw spirits.

'Long life and the love o' God!' said Angus, draining off the liquor. 'Och, but that's a goot dram!'

‘Take a seat by the fire and warm yourself. Have you been far this time?’

‘The world’s wide, and I’ve wandered far,’ answered Angus, seating himself on a stool by the fire. ‘Through the island of Skye to Portree, where there’s muckle thieving and little feeshing, and over the ferry at Kyle Akin, and awa’ on the road to Inverness; and a fine toon it is, wi’ plenty o’ fine gentry, and kirks and hooses by the score. Then I cam’ doon the great canal to Fort William, and there I gat a passage to Oban; and at Oban I lost the pride o’ my heart, Donacha Dhu, for he was tossed by a bull on the quay, and cam’ down on the water as deid as a stane. You mind Duncan, doctor!—him withoot a tail, a collie, and mair sense in ane of his paws than in most men’s brains. It was a sair grief to me, but I just bore up, for we must aal dee. Then I took the road to Ardrishaig, and had

eneuch to dae wi' thieves and tinker folk wha were travelling the same gait, and were no fit company for a decent man. You would weary greatly, and sae I tell you, if I spoke of a' my adventures in the Sooth country. It's a thriving country, but a' covered owre with the deil's reek frae a thousand lums ; and the people there are mean, fashless dirt, and the gentry meanest of all. But it would dae your heart goot to see the big river Clyde, and the great steamers, for all the warld like the beasts in the Revelations ; the ships sailing about with their white wings, and the air sae fu' of the noise of hammers, and the making of a thousand ships. It's an awfu' place—jest like the bad place itsel'. And I walked awa' up the country by night, and I saw a hundred fires flaming in the mirk on every side of me, and I heard the foof-foofing of the crimson flames, and I saw the black

shapes walking about in the heart of the reek, and, begging grace of your reverence, and nae offence to Doctor John, I thought I was in hell !'

'Faith,' said the doctor, 'you're no the first man that the same sight has led to the same conclusion. Did you see Glasgow ?'

Without directly replying to the question, Angus kept his eyes fixed on the fire, and continued his narrative in a monotone as if it were something he had learned by heart. Allied to his air of mingled simplicity and cunning, he evinced a simpering sort of self-esteem, especially as to his own intellectual shrewdness—a peculiarity common enough among people of his class.

'I saw the big ceety of Glasgow, and it's a wonderfu' place, but fu' of rogues as an egg is of meat. The hooses are that big that they reach up into the clouds, and the sky above is jest reek, and the faces of aal

the folk are black and grey wi' breathing o' reek and fire. I saw more horses and cairts in ae day than I ever saw in my life before, and the folk going to and fro were like waves of the sea ; and the streets were fu' of painted shops for the sale of drink, and at ilka street corner there's a blackguard in black ready to take up any decent man that asks help for the love o' God. I fell in wi' bad company there—more shame to me—and the curse o' God seemed to have come upon me when I found mysel' consorting wi' thieves and bad women, and when I spoke to these same on the shamefulness of their ways, they fell upon me and the dogs and left the whole of us in the streets for dead. Then they lockit me in a black hole o' stane, and all nicht lang I heard the dogs howling ootside in the street because they werena allooed to come to me ; and when day came, and they let me oot, I shook the

‘dust off the soles of my feet and cam’ awa’,
for deil a ane would gie a crust or a drap to
a decent man, and none would ludge me for
the love o’ God.’

‘Well, well,’ observed the doctor, ‘you’ll
no be taking *that* road in a hurry. It’s no
for poor men, and you were wandering awa’
from your meat.’

Angus looked at the speaker dreamily.

‘I dinna ken but what you’re right,
Doctor John, for you’re a clever man and a
scholar ; but, begging your pardon, and
long life to you, I think it’s a goot thing for
a lad to see the world he lives in, and study
the wonderfu’ works o’ Nature to the best of
his pooer ; and knowledge doesna come to a
man withoot trouble, and mony a time it’s
boocht dear. It’s a great city, Glasgow,
just a weelderness whaur nae man can find
his way, and though it’s fu’ of meat and
drink, and iron ships, and silver and gold.

and though they're telling me the rich folk sleep on crimson velvet beds stuffed wi' the down o' the wild swan, it made my heart sair to see the mony helpless duggies—some of them no much older than these pups I hae in my breist—wandering about the naked streets wi' ne'er a saul to own or feed them. It's a true proverb, "Bad dug, bad maister," and the dugs of the big city have ways ony decent man's dugs would be ashamed to own. They cheat and steal, they curse and swear, they waylay and maltreat the stranger, and do you wonder at that when they ken nae better, and they're following the wicked ways of man? They're a' breeds but the best, and mostly vagabonds: no but what I saw many decent-like dugs at the West End, playing on the doorsteps and in the parks, though some of these sought to drive me frae the doors. But, as I was saying, my heart grieved for the crea-

tures with neither hoose nor hame, and many a crust I gied them, when I had a hungry belly myself, when I saw them standing in the street, maybe sniffing the steam o' the cookshop, and licking their chops wi' their een fu' of grief and longing.'

Here the speaker's eye fell upon Mina, who had re-entered the kitchen, and was listening attentively to his monologue.

'And praise be to God, there's the bonnie face I was thinking of—mair bloom to it, and a brave gentleman to kiss it aal in goot time. I'm talking, miss, of the poor wandering outcasts of the earth. I was wondering whether you would take a preesent from a puir man like myself, that has more children than he can manage, and more mooths than he can feed.'



CHAPTER VIII.

CANINE WAIFS AND STRAYS.

WHILE he spoke Angus had shuffled over to the door ; opening it now, he gave a low whistle. The signal was immediately responded to by no less than four different animals of the canine species. First there ran in, wagging his tail very rapidly, a wretched-looking cur of no particular breed, which Angus addressed as Shemus, or James, and bade him lie down in a corner ; next stalked in a doleful-looking white dog, not unlike a French poodle, but very dirty and disreputable indeed.

Thirdly, a collie pup, very long in the legs and soft in the head. Lastly, with his tail between his legs, and his whole air expressive of disgust, a small black and white terrier, very small and prettily-formed.

‘That’s Shemus, and you aal ken him weel,’ said Angus, as they entered one by one; ‘and this is Phemus Ban, and wha doesna ken Phemus between this and Stornoway? And the next is wee Duncan, Donacha Dhu’s son and heir. And the last—see till him, Miss Mina, hoo he leuks at ance to yoursel’—is the dog I was speaking aboot. He’s a clever chiel’, though his troobles have preyed heavily upon his mind; and if you’ll tak’ him, I’ll gie him till you wi’ my blessing. He’ll mak’ a brave beast to run after a bonnie young leddy like yoursel’.’

One might have almost fancied that the wretched object in question knew every

word that Angus was saying, for, crouched upon the ground, he looked with a curious eye at the girl. Wet with rain, worn with fatigue, and possibly very hungry, he looked by no means a desirable acquisition ; but there was something in his forlorn face which appealed to pity, and Mina took him at once on her lap and began to caress him. He received her advances without enthusiasm, sullenly awaiting the issue of the conversation.

‘Poor wee man,’ said Mina. ‘Is he hungry?’

‘I’ll ask him,’ said Angus, quietly. ‘Are you hungry, Billie?’

The dog, as if he understood the question, thrust out his tongue to lick his wet jaws, and slightly wagged his tail.

‘He says he’s ready for his supper,’ cried Angus, interpreting ; ‘though he’s had many a scrap by the road. It’s low speerits,

darling, not hunger, that's the matter wi' him.'

'What's he low-spirited aboot?' asked the doctor.

'Ask your ain heart, Doctor John,' returned Angus, 'what you would be low-spirited aboot if you had gane a'thegither wrang and were wandering amang strangers. Dogs are like men—they can be sorry as weel as hungry, lonely as weel as feared, dull in the spirits as weel as cold in the wame. I found him up a dark entry in the ceety of Glasgow, sleeping his lane, oot of the cold, in a place where I meant to sleep mysel', for ne'er a saul would gie a decent man a bed; and he was stairving, and I gied him meat; and he was cauld, and I warmed him here on my ain naked flesh. Then I thought I'd bring him back wi' me to Uribol, as a present to the colleen with the bird's voice; for, look you, my braw

leddy' (here he addressed himself to Mina), 'the dog is a good dog, wi' real blood intil him, though he had fallen on evil ways. It's no me that would come here asking your acceptance o' a beast o' nae quality, after aal you've done and said to me and mine.'

Thereupon, better to illustrate the 'game' qualities of the animal, Angus proceeded to lift him by various parts of his person successively—by the tip of the ear, by the mouth, by the skin of the neck, by the tip of the tail—all which indignities the unfortunate stranger bore without a murmur, though his eye was fixed, as if in sullen protest, on the face of the mendicant.

'There !' said Angus, in a tone of approbation ; 'you'll ne'er regret his keep. It'll dae your heart goot to see him on rats, and the weasel doesna walk he willna face. You'll find him a constant soorce of dee-

various, and muckle sport he'll bring you.'

Although this last recommendation could scarcely be said to have much weight, seeing that Mina's favourite diversions were certainly not those of rat-killing and vermin-hunting, Angus obviously thought that he had triumphantly shown the preciousness of the prize. Meanwhile Mina was feeding the little outcast with scraps of meat.

One word as to Angus's peculiar taste, from which he received his popular name. It must not be imagined for a moment that he was a dog-fancier, or dealer in dogs—nothing of the sort; he kept dogs about him simply because he loved them, and one animal of the species was generally to him as good as another. He knew a first-rate breed when he saw it, and often turned a good penny by selling a fine specimen to this or that gentleman; for his knowledge

and good faith were both trusted. Any houseless dog, however, was sure of his protection till he could get an owner for it; the wretcheder and uglier it was, the more it seemed to move his compassion. He was a severe but a just master, with a singular power of eliciting the best qualities of a dog. Many an utterly stupid animal was handed over to Angus as a last resource, and given back to the owner, after a month or two, thoroughly reclaimed and enlightened.

Speaking generally, however, Angus had no regular profession, not even that of a mendicant. He belonged to that almost extinct class of persons, the Fools, who were regarded in the Highlands as under the special protection of the Almighty, and entitled to 'bite and sup' wherever they choose to pause and rest in their pilgrimages.

Many of those Fools were utter idiots; others, again, like Angus, were incompre-

hensible persons, so shrewd and clever in a thousand ordinary matters, and so wild and eccentric in one or two particulars—notably as to dress and personal bearing. In either case they were generally strong, able-bodied men, capable of enduring infinite privation and fatigue. They came and went as they listed—as if blown by a divine breath, and under the divine care. No man molested them; few or none denied them their crust, their drop of milk, and their night's shelter.

All his life Angus had wandered about the north, and especially about Uribol; and that life had, on the whole, been a happy one. He was not lonely, for he had his dogs—his 'bairns,' as he called them—for company, and there was always some new member of his family to train and instruct. He never suffered them to steal even so much as a bone, but educated them virtuously with the greatest care and tenderness.

He was indeed, after his own dim lights, a creature of unblemished honour; ever priding himself, as we have seen, on his character of 'decent man,' though never forgetting that he possessed a certain divine privilege to receive alms, if he demanded it, 'for the love of God.' Through cold and wet, through storm and snow, by land and water, in all weathers, he wandered with his little family. At night the dogs nestled round his body, giving and taking warmth. Most of his meals were docked for their sake, and often he would sit by hungry and see them eat, showing in his treatment of these dumb things the nicest honour, the most fatherly care, and the tenderest affection.

Of late years he had taken to wandering far from the land of his birth, and had assumed more of the habits and ways of professional beggars. His desire, as he said,

was 'to see the world.' In the course of this laudable pursuit, he received, as most men do when they first wander out world-seeing, a good deal of rough treatment and sorry dishallucination. He was not daunted, although he speedily discovered that he was denied abroad the privileges which he had enjoyed from time immemorial at home. He attributed this fact to the ignorance and inferiority of strangers, and merely compassionated their unhappy condition. To his poor wandering wits the world was wonderful and beautiful. Roaming in the lowland districts of Ayrshire, or on the banks of the Clyde, he felt as far from home and kindred, as mighty a traveller over the earth, as others do who explore the American prairie, or wander along the great wall of China. He was among a strange people, in a far land, speaking with difficulty a foreign tongue. In the course of his happy

pilgrimages—happy with all their privations, because he thoroughly enjoyed them—he had, as we have seen, gone as far south as Glasgow, and the sight of the great city had been a wonder and a portent great enough to last the poor wanderer all the rest of his life.

Angus would have talked on by the hour, but the minister now interposed, and insisted that the whole party should retire for the night.

A bed in the house had been prepared for the doctor. As for Angus with the dogs, he was lighted out to his usual sleeping-place, the byre, where, on a deep warm bed of fresh straw, surrounded by his children, he slept such sleep, and dreamed such dreams, as Solomon in all his glory never enjoyed, and as are granted only to a clear conscience, an innocent mind, and a gentle heart.



CHAPTER IX.

THE WANDERER FINDS QUIET QUARTERS.

ABOUT a mile from the manse, and nearer to the cluster of mud huts known as the clachan, stood a one-storied white-washed building, surrounded on every side by open heather and tracts of soft marsh. This was the abode during a small portion of every summer of Mr. Peter Dougall, resident factor to Lord Arranmore.

Some days after the entry of the little yacht into Loch Uribol, Peter Dougall sat alone in the best chamber of the cottage,

which he called his 'office,' but which was furnished very plainly as a parlour. He was a grim-looking, elderly man, clad in a rudely-cut suit of the kind known as pepper-and-salt, and bearing in every lineament of his hard countenance the signs of low intelligence, cunning, and tenacity of purpose.

He was busily engaged in looking over certain papers, docketing them, and arranging them upon his table, when a barefooted Highland woman, who did for this grim bachelor the duties of maid-of-all-work, announced a visitor.

She spoke in Gaelic, and Dougall was questioning sharply in the same tongue, when, with little or no ceremony, a tall, athletic figure entered the room.

'Excuse me for intruding upon you,' said a clear, sharp voice ; 'but you are Mr. Dougall ?'

‘ Yes, sir,’ said the factor, staring in some surprise at the intruder.

‘ My name is Lawrance, and I have just come from the south. I have a letter for you ; will you be kind enough to read it ?’

So saying, the speaker opened a pocket-book and took from it a note, which he quietly handed over. Dougall started slightly and knitted his heavy brows as he looked at the handwriting on the envelope. Then opening the letter he read as follows :

‘ MY DEAR SIR,

‘ This note will be given you by my friend Mr. Lawrance, who is on a tour in Scotland this summer. I have advised him to visit Uribol, and promised that you will put him in the way of some wild sport, of which he is very fond. Consider him as my representative, and let him do whatever he pleases with whatever is mine.

‘Take no steps whatever in matters of business till you hear from me again ; I have not yet decided on the changes you were good enough to suggest. When you write next address Messrs. Thompson and Threadneedle, my agents, as before. I leave London to-morrow, and shall be absent for some months.

‘Yours, etc.,

‘ARRANMORE.

‘To Mr. Peter Dougall, Factor, Uribol, N.B.’

The factor glanced from the letter to the bearer, from the bearer to the letter, in momentary embarrassment ; then, forcing his face to a smile, he welcomed Lawrance, with great respect and a certain cordiality, to the Highlands.

‘And you will be the shentleman,’ he said, ‘who came ower in the small pleasure yacht?’

‘ Yes. She is now lying at the mouth of the loch.’

‘ A ponnie vessel. I saw her fine frae the hill. I’m concerned that I didna see you pefore, sir, when you arrived. Weel, you hafe come to a poor country for plee-sure. It is seldom I am in Uribol, unless I hafe beesiness here ; and my ain hoose is at Storport, fifteen miles down the coast. Did you leave my lord weel, sir, may I ask ?’

‘ Never better.’

‘ Ah, he is a grand man, Lord Arranmore—and he has gone again aproad ?’

‘ I dare say,’ said Lawrance, carelessly ; ‘ he hates the English climate.’

‘ It is a pad climate for shentry,’ said the factor ; then, moved by hospitable intentions, he went to a cupboard in the room, and, unlocking it, produced bottles and wine-glasses.

‘What will you tak’, sir? Whisky or sherry wine?’

‘Neither, thank you.’

‘It is goot whisky, and the wine is goot. Let me give you a glass of the sherry wine;’ and he added thoughtfully, while Lawrance took the proffered glass, ‘I am glad, fera glad, that my lord is weel.’

In a few minutes Lawrance and Dougall were seated face to face, talking without restraint of general matters, but chiefly about Loch Uribol, its sports and its population. The old factor had obviously been a sportsman in his youth, and he soon afforded his guest much valuable information on the amusements to be had in the locality. He knew the best streams for fishing, the lochs most frequented by the wild geese, and the portions of the moor where grouse were likely to be most plentiful. On the whole he impressed Lawrance as a shrewd, service-

able old fellow, with a good deal of common sense.

Despite his pleasantness of manner, however, he was clearly a little suspicious that his visitor might have been sent over by Lord Arranmore to report secretly on the state of the estates—a course of proceedings which he would have been strongly inclined to resent had he been certain of the facts.

‘And his lordship is weel,’ he repeated for the third or fourth time. ‘May I ask, sir, does he never think of veesiting his Hie-land estates?’

‘I have heard him talk of doing so a dozen times, but he is fond of great cities, and rather dislikes his native country. Doubtless, though, he’ll soon take a run over.’

‘May it pe soon!’ said the factor, with some fervour. ‘A shentleman should see

his ain groond, and find oot if it is goot groond, and if the rents are goot.'

Lawrance shrugged his shoulders.

'It strikes me that Lord Arranmore would not be much wiser if he came. He is no farmer, and scarcely knows a harrow from a plough.'

The factor took a pinch of snuff, drew down his brows, and looked keenly at the stranger.

'That may be, sir, but he's a poorer man this day than he need be if he would do as I weesh him, or if he would come for himsel' and see. There's no an acre of his estate, from the Point of Raw to the Sound of Cule, but should be down in sheep.'

'Indeed.'

'And what is mair,' continued Dougall excitedly (for he was on his hobby), 'he should be getting rent for every armful of kelp that is burnt on his ain foreshores.

The land is goot land, but it is covered with the scum of the earth, sir—lazy peasts of men and women that should be shippit across the sea.'

Lawrance looked at the speaker with some curiosity.

'Ah, yes,' he said, after a moment's reflection. 'Lord Arranmore told me something of this. You think the place over-populated.'

Dougall's face flushed, and he struck the table with his open hand.

'If I had my will I would tooble the rent in five years. I would have nane upon the land but the shepherds, and I would pring hands from the Sooth to make kelp in the season, and I would tak' it to my ain market, for my ain price.'

'A policy of extermination,' remarked Lawrance, with a yawn, real or assumed. 'It seems rather sharp practice, doesn't it?'

‘I told my lord’s faither, again and again, to clear the land; and through my advice, sir, he pulled toon mony a hoose that was a disgrace to ceevilisation, and shipped awa’ mony a lazy loon that cumbered the goot land. He would have done mair but for meeschief-makers and meddlers, sir; and if he had done mair he never would have died in debt. I would give my right hand, sir, if the young laird would come and see the place for himsel’.

‘And he will come, of course, some day.’

‘And if he does come,’ exclaimed the factor irritably, for on this subject he was hard to please, ‘what do the shentry ken apoot the land? There would be meeschief-makers and meddlers, sir, to mak’ oot I was wrang. There is in this clachan, sir, a meenister of the Kirk, and that meenister should be trooned in the sea, like all the rest of his kind. Would you pelieve, sir, that

once when the old laird was alive, but pad wi' the gout, I wrote a letter adveeing him to turn the folk from Plabba Island and gife it to my ain son for sheep for tooble the rent; and the tamned meenister made oot a peteetion, and made every man, woman, and child put his mark to the peteetion, and sent it to the laird by the post; and sure enough the old laird wrote back that I was to let the people of Plabba pe, whether they paid their rent or no !'

Lawrance, who had been listening throughout with a curious expression, half severe, half cynical, here said quietly :

'After all, it is rather a serious responsibility to turn people wholesale out of house and home. Don't you think so?'

'That is true, sir,' returned the factor; adding, triumphantly, 'but if it was for their ain goot, sir? They ruin the goot land, and they're eaten up wi' hunger and

disease, when oot yonder in America there's meelions o' miles o' airable land to be had for the asking. The land here was made for sheep. It'll no grow a crop, and it canna feed a man. It's my opinion, sir, that it's pad for Hielandmen to remain at hame. There's nae competeetion here, and there's nae industry. It would pe far petter if the whole Hielands were doon in sheep—petter for the lairds, petter for the people, petter for the cattle, and petter for the markets of the sooth.'

This seemed to settle the matter, so far as the factor was concerned, and Lawrance seemed far too indifferent to pursue it further. Chiefly to change the subject, but with a practical object in view, the latter now consulted Dougall about a lodging. His vessel, he explained, was too small to be a comfortable home when at anchor, and as he intended to stay in the neighbourhood

for some weeks, he would, if possible, live ashore.

With some little hesitation, the factor offered the use of the cottage in which they then stood, adding that he himself would be pleased to return after he had transacted some little business in Storport, and be the stranger's guide over the whole district.

To the latter part of the proposal Lawrance strongly demurred.

'I will accept the cottage with pleasure,' he said; 'but I insist that you shall not put yourself to any personal inconvenience on my account. Indeed, I infinitely prefer to be left alone, and to acquaint myself with a locality in my own way. Even so invaluable a guide as yourself would be superfluous and irksome, though I thank you all the same.'

'As you please, sir,' said Dougall, rather

grimly. 'But if I could be of any service, it would be a pleasure.'

'When do you go?' asked Lawrance, brusquely.

'It was my intention to gang to-day; but I will stay on till to-morrow, and see you made comfortable.'

'Don't delay an hour on my account,' said Lawrance. 'To a citizen of the world, and to one who has roughed it in the bush, and camped out on the prairie, this is as good as a palace. Calum shall bring my lumber ashore, and his services, with those of the woman already in your employ, shall be more than sufficient.'

'But you will need a guide upon the hills, sir. They are goot for game, but you must be weel acquaint wi' the ground to find it. Now, I mysel'——'

'Don't think of it, I pray,' said Lawrance. 'Trust an old sportsman for discovering

whatever he wants. I like to potter about in my own way, and acquire my own information without assistance.'

So it was settled, not without a certain curious misgiving, felt but not expressed, on the factor's part. That afternoon Dougall departed on the back of a rough Hebridean pony, purposing to ride down the road to Tongue, crossing the numerous narrow estuaries by finding them at low water. He had scarcely disappeared when Calum, assisted by a couple of bare-legged lads from the clachan, brought ashore Lawrance's goods and chattels—a couple of portmantaus, gun-cases, fishing-rods, fishing materials, a few books, some boxes of cigars, and divers odds and ends for the cruise.

Late that evening Lawrance sat alone in the little parlour, surrounded by his portable property, and waited upon by Dougall's Highland servant, with whom he vainly

tried to conduct a conversation by signs and interjections; while here and there in the clachan gathered excited groups discussing with many wild words and gestures an extraordinary and unprecedented phenomenon—the arrival of an entire stranger, and that stranger an English gentleman, among the solitudes of Loch Uribol.





CHAPTER X.

A SPORTING EPISODE AND ITS TERMINATION.

‘ DARK sky, a land mist, and a stiff breeze from the sou'-east—we might have known before we started, Calum, that these would not make a good sporting day, even in Sutherlandshire.’

It was Lawrance who spoke, and as he did so he lay indolently back in the stern of the boat, and glanced at the cold grey prospect of sea and sky.

It was one of those dark summer days so common in the Highlands. The sky was

one great pall of shifting vapour, through which the sun's rays struggled faintly, touching here and there to dim silver the edges of the black waters of the loch. On the peaks of the hills stirred a white steam of cloud, while the waters of the loch were rippled into heavy wavelets by the sea-breeze, which every moment seemed to be waxing stronger.

Two hours before, the boat, a small light thing of some twelve feet in length, had glided away from the side of the *Jenny*, and passed right into the mouth of the fjord; and though before starting Lawrance had anticipated a good day's sport, nothing much had been done. True, he had bagged a few sea-birds—among which was a remarkably fine specimen of the eider-duck—but, on the other hand, several of his shots, through the continual tossing of the boat, had whizzed harmlessly through the air, and

he had been left to stand and watch, with straining eyes, the fading of his coveted prize.

‘Suppose we give up?’ said Lawrance, at last; ‘it’s a detestable day.’

Calum, who was at the oars, glanced phlegmatically round.

‘The day is nae sae bad,’ he said; ‘and up till this the sport hasna been sae bad. You’ll shoot better when you come to the seals.’

At this Lawrance seemed somewhat appeased, and as the boat glided gently on he took up his glass and carefully scanned the water and the shore. Suddenly he rose excitedly to his feet, almost upsetting the boat as he did so.

‘By Jove!’ he exclaimed; ‘Hamish, look through the glass at that black rock yonder, and tell me if it isn’t covered with something living?’

‘ Maybe,’ said Hamish, quietly ; and having by a look through the glass satisfied himself that it was a fact, he advised Lawrance to make ready while he rowed on. So Lawrance, rifle in hand, crouched down in the stern of the boat, which, with muffled oars, crept stealthily along the shore. The seals were distinctly visible by this time—they clung like seaweed to the rock, their silken coats shining in the light. But all at once the liquid eyes of one of the beasts rolled round and perceived the oncoming boat, which was by this time within a distance of ninety yards of the rock itself. Instantly the creatures, as if from one impulse, rolled rapidly off the rock, and sank with wild splashes beneath the surface of the water.

The boat stood still ; Lawrance shouldered his rifle.

‘ Steady, sir, steady !’ cried Calum.

One moment more and the water all around the boat was clothed with floating heads. Lawrance aimed at the one nearest to him and fired ; as he did so the boat gave a lurch, the bullet sped harmlessly through the air, and every head disappeared.

‘ Like my ill luck,’ cried Lawrance. ‘ It is this confounded coble which does it all ! Pull for the shore, Calum ; I’ll perhaps get a shot from the beach.’

Without a word Calum obeyed. Almost immediately the boat was run upon the shingle, and Lawrance leapt ashore. But the seals did not reappear, and Lawrance was at a loss what to do. Presently, however, at Hamish’s suggestion, he walked quietly along the shingle, and kept a sharp look-out over the water, leaving Calum himself to stay by the half-stranded boat and keep watch too.

Suddenly, and before he had gone many

yards, his eyes were attracted to a black mass which lay dead-still on the beach, close to the edge of the water—a big, black, shapeless lump, which might be a weed-covered rock, it was so still. Lawrance strained his eyes, but could make nothing of it—he used his glass with the same result. He walked rapidly on, keeping his eyes fixed upon it. All at once the black mass stirred, and slightly shifted its position. Yes, there was no doubt of it—it was a seal !

Rapidly he surveyed the ground, and came to the conclusion that the animal might be stalked. Fortunately for his purpose the wind was blowing from the water, and about thirty yards above high-water mark, or sixty from the unconscious seal, there was a large boulder, from behind which it would be easy to fire the fatal shot at close range. Taking the necessary marks, and making a long detour, Lawrance

gradually approached the shelter of the boulder.

Hamish remained seated in the distance, and watched his master with no little excitement.

All went well, and Lawrance, having reached the boulder, peeped over and saw the animal still in the same position. The sunlight glimmered upon its moist skin so that it shone again, and its head turned seaward, while its nostrils sniffed the breeze. The tide was running past with great rapidity, and half-a-dozen cormorants, diving repeatedly, were drifting swiftly down the fjord.

Stooping softly, he took his rifle and noiselessly prepared to take aim. At that very moment he heard a sound in the distance like the sound of a voice singing—the seal pricked up its head listening—then suddenly, and before Lawrance

could fire, slipped into the water and disappeared.

With an angry exclamation Lawrance started out from his shelter and began moving towards the water, in the hope of getting a shot swimming. He was disappointed. The seal rose several hundred yards away, and then, after drifting rapidly along with the tide for a moment, dived again.

Lawrance stood baffled, knowing well that it was useless to follow. Suddenly, however, he was startled by certain wild manœuvres on the part of Calum, who was frantically waving his hat and pointing towards the sea. Full of impatience, and irritated, Lawrance strode over and rejoined him.

‘ Well, what is it ? ’

Calum answered by putting his fingers on his lips, stooping low, and jerking his

thumb towards the water. So Lawrance crept cautiously forward, and, peering over the rocks, saw a sight which filled him with amazement. Two hundred yards below him lay the boat where they had left it, with its stern just in the water, and sitting on the stern seat, having obviously just climbed thither from the sea, was the seal!

Such supreme impudence, in so cautious an animal—one which habitually shrinks from anything handled by human touch—almost took away his breath, but not for a moment did he suspect the truth. Rifle in hand, he began creeping over the rocks to a spot which would afford him another excellent chance. This time he felt tolerably certain of his victim. Reaching a rock about a hundred yards from the boat, he prepared to fire. The gun was lifted to his shoulder, he was about to take aim, when

suddenly, to his intense astonishment, a figure stept from among the rocks and rose between him and the water !

The figure of a young girl, with neither hat nor bonnet on her head. She did not seem conscious of his presence, but was looking towards the sea.

In a moment he had crept forward, and had silently reached her side. She turned at the sound, and looked at him in some surprise. He, for his part, was not a little amazed, for the face he saw was pretty and young, and he dimly remembered having seen it before. His excitement as a sportsman, however, so carried him away that, scarcely looking at her, he made her a sign to be silent and pointed to the water; then, before she could interfere, knelt down to take aim.

A wild cry interrupted him, and just as his finger was on the trigger, the rifle was

nearly knocked from his hand. The bullet sped harmlessly through the air, while the seal, obviously astonished, slipt again into the water, and began swimming to and fro, his uplifted head turned in the direction whence the sound had come.

He looked up. Over against him stood the young girl, pale with excitement, her lips quivering, her eyes flashing. At that moment Calum ran over, and attacked her fiercely in Gaelic. She answered in the same tongue, pointing now to the rifle, again to the swimming seal.

‘What does it mean?’ cried Lawrance; ‘what does she say?’

Calum scratched his head and grinned.

‘She’s saying that she daurs ye to touch yon creature, and that we desairve to be shotted oursel’s for molesting it. Speak till her, sir. She beats me a’thegither.’

‘Can you speak English?’ cried Lawrance, sharply.

To his surprise the girl answered him in his own tongue.

‘I can speak English,’ she said, steadfastly fixing her eyes on his; ‘what then, sir?’

Lawrance forced a laugh.

‘You have spoiled my shot, that’s all. But for you, I should have bagged my first seal. Why did you interfere?’

The girl, in the Scottish fashion, answered the question with another. It was clear that she was much agitated, but she managed to preserve her outward composure.

‘Why should you take the poor seal’s life? It’s not like a gentleman, let alone a brave man, to kill a poor creature that never did him any harm.’

Lawrance gazed at the speaker in still greater astonishment. He now recognised her perfectly as the girl who had piloted his

vessel into Loch Uribol, and recovering his self-control, he smilingly raised his hat.

‘I am a brute for my pains,’ he said. ‘Why, now I know you ! You got us out of our scrape, the other day, entering the loch, and I have never yet thanked you.’

‘I’m asking no thanks,’ said Mina ; ‘ only let Earach be.’ Then, moving quickly away, she leapt up on a rock, and cried, in a clear voice, ‘ Earach ! Earach ! ’

The seal heard, raised his head eagerly, and looked towards her. So far from flying from her, the seal swam swiftly to the shore, and floundering out on the tangled weeds, awaited her coming.

Not a little excited by what he saw, Lawrance followed and watched the meeting. Mina stood on the water’s edge, and the seal crawled to her feet and looked up in her face.

Lawrance gave a low whistle.

‘Why, it’s *tame*!’ he cried. ‘What a fool I’ve been!’

Mina made no reply, but laid her hand caressingly on the animal’s glistening head. Its dim, gentle eyes looked softly into hers, with perfect confidence and affection.

‘It does not seem the least frightened,’ continued Lawrance.

Mina answered him without raising her eyes, which were fixed on those of the animal.

‘Why should it be afraid? No man hereabouts would harm Earach. See how he speaks to me, sir! See how he slips his cheek into my hand! He’s as wise as a human creature, and twice as kindly.’

For a time Lawrance did not reply. He felt his position a foolish one. Not only had he been caught in the extremely ignominious pursuit of shooting at a tame seal, but he seemed in a fair way of being lectured

on cruelty to animals by—well, by a peasant girl.

Calum helped him very neatly out of his dilemma.

‘You’re a braw leddy and a brave,’ he said, gazing admiringly at the girl’s graceful slim figure and lovely face. ‘And hoo is it that ye ken sae weel how to handle a boat?’

At that moment Earach rolled lazily on to his side, and falling heavily into the water, splashed the girl liberally with spray. She laughed as she shook her dress, and stepping lightly from rock to rock, leapt on to the shingle. Then, after speaking a word or two to Calum in Gaelic, she seemed about to depart.

But Lawrance stepped forward.

‘Pardon me,’ he said, with a courtesy which was scarcely habitual with him, ‘I do not even know your name.’

The girl paused and looked at him.

‘My name is Mina Macdonald,’ she said.

Lawrance bowed.

‘I shall remember it as long as I keep the life which you gave me !’

At this the girl flushed and dropped her eyes.

‘Please dinna speak of that again, sir. It was because there was no other soul in the village that I came out !’

Lawrance was puzzled. He had already discovered by intuition that she could be no common peasant girl, and so had banished from his mind all thoughts of remuneration. It now remained to find out who she could be. He must say something, and quickly—the girl seemed impatient to be gone.

‘You live in the village ?’ he asked.

It seemed a superfluous question, but he could think of no more direct mode

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asking what information he desired.

She replied.

‘‘Perhaps, some day before I leave, we shall—we may meet.’’

He was jerking out his sentences in a confused, uneasy way, when the girl interrupted him.

‘‘If you care to come to our house, sir,’’ she said gravely, ‘‘you will be welcome; every stranger is. I live in the clachan with my uncle, Mr. Macdonald, the minister of the parish.’’

And without more ado she bowed to Lawrance, nodded smilingly to Calum, and walked off.

‘‘You’re a bonnie lassie,’’ said Calum; and turning to Lawrance, he added, ‘‘There’s no her like to be found in Uribol!’’

Lawrance said nothing, but as he watched the girl’s fairy-like form passing silently

away, he secretly resolved that he would not be too proud to accept the off-hand invitation which she had given him.





CHAPTER XI.

IN THE PARSONAGE.

LATE that night, when most of the inhabitants of the clachan were at rest, when all about the manse was very quiet, and the old minister himself—always the last to seek his room—lay quietly asleep, Mina sat by her open window looking out upon the moonlit sea, and thinking over the scene which she had passed through that day. She had not had time to think over it before. After she had bowed to Lawrance and smiled her good-day to Calum, she had hastened home with

eager steps, and, finding her uncle there, had dutifully recounted to him all that had passed.

Mr. Macdonald listened quietly. When the story was done, he said :

‘And so, Mina, you were unmaidenly enough to ask the gentleman to call?’

‘No, I did not do that,’ returned the girl, quietly. ‘He asked me if he might come, and I said to him that at this house any stranger would be made welcome.’

‘An exemplary speech, my bairn, and one that was quite worthy of you. I am glad you did not discourage the young man. I should not find it unpleasant, I think, to have half-an-hour’s chat with an educated stranger.’

After that nothing more was said on the subject. Mina went through her evening lessons with as much care, and perhaps rather more thoughtfulness, than usual,

and when they were over she took a book and sat down to read. It seemed she had not even been thinking of the stranger, for when, on wishing her good-night, the minister again casually mentioned his name, she gave a start of surprise.

‘I forgot to ask you, Mina, and I think you forgot to tell me, what the strange gentleman is like?’

‘What he is like?’ she repeated, feeling the tell-tale colour suddenly suffuse her face.

‘Yes; I have settled in my mind, and I don’t know why, that, if he is not old, he must at least be middle-aged. Young men are not generally in the habit of seeking solitudes such as these.’

‘No,’ said Mina, thoughtfully; ‘indeed they are not; and when I saw the strange gentleman to-day I was surprised.’

‘Then, I suppose, he is young.’

‘Yes, uncle, quite young.’

Mina looked down as she made the admission ; she therefore felt rather than saw the minister was disappointed. The two stood silent for a moment, then Mina raised her eyes.

‘I’m thinking the gentleman will not trouble *us* much while he is in Uribol,’ she said.

‘Maybe not, my bairn ; nevertheless if he does come he must be made welcome!’ Then he kissed her, and she went away to her room.

She went to her room, but she did not prepare for rest. Long after her uncle had retired she sat at her open window, thinking partly of his words and partly of the scene which she had enacted on the seashore.

Her conduct during that scene had been very proper indeed, she said to herself with

pride—quite as proper as the conversation which she had just had with her uncle downstairs ; but though she had felt it right to cloak her feelings before both of these men, she could at least unveil them when alone. Therefore as she sat at the window listening to the soft murmuring of the sea, she allowed herself to conjure up a vision of the stranger's face, the outline of his slim figure ; to recall the pleasant tone of his voice when he courteously addressed her ; the light which shone in his eyes as he had looked into hers. Perhaps it was wrong of her, she thought, but she had certainly been unable to share her uncle's feeling of disappointment on finding that the stranger was young—indeed, she thought it was pleasant to have seen so young and fair a face among the wilds of Uribol—pleasanter to know that she was likely to look upon it soon again.

Soon?—would he be likely to come soon—or was it probable that her formal coldness would have the effect of keeping him away? She had certainly given him so little encouragement that she would have no right to blame him if he chose to take no further notice of her at all.

This idea was so painful to her that it troubled her continually during her sleep that night, and the next morning it was so strong in her mind that she mentioned it to her uncle at breakfast.

The minister looked very grave.

‘You seem to be very anxious that this young man should come to us, Mina,’ he said.

‘No, not that, uncle. I’m only feared I may have been rude!’

‘Then set your mind at rest, Mina; you behaved with great courtesy and discretion. If the young man wishes to come, depend

upon it he will deem the invitation strong enough; if he does not, perhaps it will be for the best!’

‘For the best!’

‘Even so, my bairn. A wealthy young Englishman is hardly the sort of companion I should choose for either of us two!’

But Mina thought differently.

She felt that it would be pleasant to feel the young stranger’s presence in her uncle’s lonely dwelling, even though it should come like a ray of sunlight to brighten and fade. But she spoke of him no more.

Meanwhile Lawrance, strolling about the heather before his door, was thinking over the invitation which Mina had given him, and wondering how soon it would be polite for him to take her at her word.

‘I confess,’ he said to himself, ‘I should like to see my mysterious heroine at home—and had she infused anything like warmth

into the invitation I should have thought nothing of strolling over to-day ; but she gave it so coldly—and had I not almost asked for it I don't believe she would have given it at all. Well, after all, it does not matter. These sort of people don't stand upon ceremony. And they would not be very much surprised if I did stroll over. Calum,' he added, as the old seaman suddenly appeared, 'which is the clergyman's house?'

'I dinna ken the exact road till it, sir ; but it lies in that direction, somewhere among the trees. Will you be going out in the boat to-day, sir?'

'No—yes. Go into the kitchen ; I'll let you know in a few minutes' time.'

With a respectful pull at his forelock Calum walked off, and Lawrance recommenced his meditative stroll. The result of his meditations was that he did go for a

boating excursion, but so little interested was he that by three o'clock in the afternoon his boat lay upon the beach, and he himself was striding rapidly over the hills towards the manse.

Seen by daylight it was a small two-storied house with a slated roof and white-washed walls. Its face was turned seaward, while beside it arose a few straggling trees. It was surrounded by the rough heather-clad hill—indeed wild grass and heather grew up to the very threshold ; its size and its slated roof only distinguished it outwardly from the huts of the people who lived in the clachan. But inside it was comfortable enough.

Lawrance having searched the door in vain for a knocker, rapped smartly with his knuckles, and was thereupon admitted by an old woman, dressed with studied neatness and cleanliness, who evidently spoke nothing

but the Gaelic tongue. She soon understood the stranger's errand, however, and, having courteously admitted him, conducted him along a narrow passage, and ushered him into what was evidently the only sitting-room, except the great cosy kitchen, which the house contained.

A square, lofty room, which afforded a striking contrast to the outside aspect of the building. Its floor was covered with a carpet which, if worn here and there into threadbare patches, was warm and comfortable to the tread, its walls adorned with row upon row of quaintly-bound volumes, curious old maps, treasured manuscripts, brown and yellow with age, while over the chimney-piece hung portraits of the master's literary gods. In one corner stood a curiously carved ebony writing-desk, which was covered with manuscripts and books of reference of every kind ; and presiding over

this was a statuette of Sir Walter Scott caressing his favourite hound.

Having in one quick glance around the room noted all this, Lawrance stood for a moment completely amazed. Had the old servant conducted him to a room which smelt of tarpaulin, and was littered with rope-ends, he would not have been surprised. The picture would have been all in keeping with the girl who steered his yacht through half a gale of wind, and afterwards appeared upon the sea-shore to protect the life of a seal ; but that he should find her buried deep in the dusty recesses of learning seemed strange indeed.

A still greater surprise was in store for him. His eyes having swept the room, returned to the hearth, and remained fixed upon two figures who were seated there. The first, the clergyman himself, habited in clerical clothes, which were quite rusty with

age ; the second, a young girl, who, standing gravely before the priest, was reading aloud some easy Latin prose. It was Mina, but how changed ! No longer the child of the elements, but a tall, grave, thoughtful student, habited in a plain, tightly-fitting home-spun dress, and with neatly braided hair. She read in a low, sweetly-modulated voice, glancing now and again into the grave face of her pastor as if for his approbation.

It was during one of these glances that her eyes met the wandering gaze of the stranger, who having approached noiselessly, now stood in hesitation at the door, and she lowered her book and blushed.

The minister, whose back was towards the door, had not perceived the visitor, but he noticed the hesitation of the girl.

‘Go on, Mina,’ he said quietly. ‘You make slow progress in the Latin, my bairn,

and must devote more time to the grammar.'

But instead of proceeding with her work, the girl resolutely closed her book, and holding forth her hand to the still hesitating figure on the threshold, bade him welcome.

'This, uncle, is the gentleman who came up to Uribol in the little yacht,' she said quietly, as he stepped into the room.

The colour which at first suffused her face had by this time completely died away, and left her very pale, yet she looked very grave and completely at her ease.

Not so Lawrance. One surprise had followed so closely upon another, that when the courteous old clergyman arose to his full height, and fixed upon him his calm, thoughtful gaze, he stood completely dumb-stricken. He recovered himself quickly,

however, and tried to speak with his usual easy grace.

‘Pray do not let me disturb you,’ he said; ‘with your permission I will retire, seeing that I have called at so very inopportune a time.’

‘The clergyman having by this time descended from his airy castle, stretched forth his hand.

‘Sir,’ he said, ‘in Loch Uribol we can always find time to pursue our studies; but we cannot always have the pleasure of welcoming a stranger. Mina, my bairn, we will put away our books if the gentleman will do us the honour to stay.’

Neither of the young people needed a warmer invitation. Mina was ready enough, at her uncle’s words, to collect her books and lay them aside; while Lawrance gladly took the chair which was offered him.

But very soon he began to observe that

the visit was not exactly going on as he had planned. He soon recovered his presence of mind perfectly, and was able to rattle on with his usual off-handed gaiety ; but it was rather hard, he thought, to extract answers from no one but Mr. Macdonald. Nevertheless, Macdonald had strong convictions on certain subjects, and Lawrance, discovering his hobby, had been quite willing to display his stock of learning by discussion. He was glad to see the old man warm to his subject—glad to see him assume a more friendly tone towards himself when he was told that the ‘wealthy’ English stranger was nothing more than a simple student of the law, who had come to the Highlands for quietness and sport, and to learn something of the Ossianic tongue.

‘I must confess that my affection for the language dates from the time when I heard it spoken by your niece. Her lips and voice

infused into it a music which it always lacks, to my ear at least, when it is spoken by the peasantry. But, then, sir, I suppose she has learnt it from you ?

‘ Yes ; Mina has had no other school-master, except, perhaps, Koll Nicholson—an old fisherman, who taught her how to sail a boat.’

At this direct allusion to herself, Mina, who hitherto had sat silently apart, raised her eyes and smiled.

‘ And Koll always says *he* was the best schoolmaster of the two !’ she said.

Lawrance laughed.

‘ Perhaps,’ he said, ‘ I ought to endorse the fisherman’s words, since through your skill in seamanship you saved my life. And that reminds me,’ he continued, slipping his hand into the side-pocket of his coat and drawing forth a small packet, ‘ I have never yet thanked you properly for

bringing in the *Jenny*, and so getting us out of a dreadful scrape that night ; but as thanks at best are useless things, may I beg of you to accept this ?'

As he spoke he undid the paper roll after roll, and held forth the contents to Mina.

A little drinking-cup of solid silver, quaintly moulded and worked inside with gold.

Mina looked at it, blushed, and hesitated, and Lawrance continued :

' If you will be good enough to accept it, Miss Macdonald, you will do me a favour, I assure you. It is a little prize cup which was won by the *Jenny* last year ; not of much value, it is true, but the most suitable present I have to offer you.'

And without giving her time to refuse he put the cup in her hands.

Nevertheless, although she held it and

admired it, she could not at first be brought to look upon it as her own. The fear of offending Lawrance ultimately won her into submission, so the cup was placed upon the ebony cabinet above the musty manuscripts and before the statuette of Scott.

When Lawrance said good-bye, he added :

‘ I hope, Miss Macdonald, you will allow me one day to show you the creature which you saved from a watery grave !’

‘ Thank you,’ returned Mina, quietly.

‘ And I trust, sir,’ he continued, turning to the clergyman, ‘ that we shall not remain strangers to one another. At present I am staying in the Lodge which belongs to Mr. Dougall, the agent on Arranmore.’

Mr. Macdonald bowed.

‘ As I disagree entirely with the factor on many subjects, I would rather not visit at his house, but I shall be pleased at any time to see you here.’

And with that they shook hands and parted.

When Lawrance was gone the clergyman returned to his studies, but Mina, after watching his figure fade away, stood looking thoughtfully for a long time at the present which he had left.





CHAPTER XII.

MINA'S QUESTIONS.

‘ WEALTHY young Englishman,’ the minister had said, ‘was certainly no fit companion for himself or for Mina.’ Nevertheless, when the wealthy Englishman was metamorphosed into a poor student the complexion of matters became somewhat changed. It was quite a relief for the clergyman, and he deemed it a very pleasant relief too, to find a young man sufficiently interested in literature as to be willing to listen to long dis-

sertations from the divine without showing impatience or unconcern.

Whenever, therefore, Lawrance chose to present himself at the manse, he was always sure of receiving a welcome—of getting a hearty handshake from the minister and a bright smile from Mina.

After the first few days Mina herself grew quite at her ease while in the company of the young Englishman. Had he been, as she at first had suspected, an aristocrat, she might have continued to regard him as a being completely outside her sphere of life ; as it was, she deemed him an equal—one whom she could assist her uncle to welcome to their house and to the Highlands.

Her nervousness, therefore, completely wore away, and ere a week had passed from the day of their first meeting, she began to treat him quite like a friend.

It seemed only natural that he should drop into the parsonage of an evening, and listen quietly while she went through her lessons, conjugated Latin verbs, and read interminable Ossianic poems.

Sometimes he joined her when she was reading the Gaelic ; and when there were no lessons to do, he would take her and the old man for a sail in the *Jenny*. Or sometimes Mina herself would take a walk with him up the stream to show him a pool where fish were likely to be found.

Since the unfortunate episode with Earach he had given up all thought of shooting seals.

To Lawrance this chance friendship was quite as interesting as it was to the Macdonalds, and he did not attempt to conceal from himself the fact that his pleasantest hours were spent in their company. Indeed, so lightly did the days go

by, and so friendly did he become with the inmates of the manse, that he seemed to forget altogether that he was only a visitor. He was reminded of the fact by Mina.

‘How long are you going to stay in Uribol?’ she asked of him one evening, as the two sat alone in the old clergyman’s study. After his dinner Lawrance had strolled over to the manse, and on learning that Mr. Macdonald had gone up the mountain to answer a sick call, had expressed his willingness to stay for a chat with Mina. With her usual candour Mina had consented, and had asked him into the sanctum of learning. She had seated herself at the open window to watch the hazy mist of light which was thickening about the mountain-tops, and Lawrance had adopted his usual plan of walking restlessly about the room, pausing sometimes to lift and examine some

well-thumbed book, or to glance carelessly at the maps upon the wall.

It was during one of these pauses, while he stood with his face raised, his hands clasped behind his back, that Mina asked the question. He turned when she did so, and smiled curiously.

‘Suppose I said until I have a thorough knowledge of the Gaelic tongue? How long would you give me, Miss Macdonald?’

‘Oh, a very long time. You would not be very quick at learning a language, I’m thinking.’

‘I could not hope to be so quick as you, but then perhaps I have not had your advantages. It is not vouchsafed to everyone to be able to steer a boat in a gale of wind, and read a page of Latin or Gaelic. Miss Macdonald, what possessed your uncle when he conceived the idea of making you such a bookworm?’

‘Of educating me himself, do you mean?’ answered the girl, simply. ‘One reason was, because he could not afford to pay folk to do it for him, and save him the trouble. The minister of Uribol has not a large income, Mr. Lawrance, and all the siller we can spare has to go to Graham.’

‘To Graham?’

‘Graham is my brother.’

‘And he does not live here?’

‘Yes, of course; this is his home. For a long time my uncle used to teach the two of us together, but since then Graham has lived in the south to pass through college. I think he is going into the kirk.’

‘Indeed!’

‘I was thinking of Graham when I speired at you how long you were likely to stay. He has written to say that he intends to come home before the hairst sets in, and

I was thinking it would be much pleasanter for you when he came!

‘I know you too well, Miss Macdonald, to accuse you of fishing for compliments,’ said the young man, with a careless laugh. ‘Nevertheless, I must speak the truth, and say that—under no circumstances whatever could my time be more pleasantly passed!’

She laughed.

‘You say that because you do not ken Graham. Once he came, you and he would be great friends, I am sure!’

‘Is he a sportsman?’

‘He used to be fond of shooting wild-fowl—he had not permission to shoot on Arranmore.’

‘Permission? I am sure he need not wait for permission.’

She smiled and asked:

‘Ah, but would Lord Arranmore say that?’

The young man flushed now, almost as deeply as she did herself. Turning carelessly to one of the maps, he began to examine it carefully.

‘Arranmore?’ he said. ‘Why, yes, of course he would. He isn’t a bad sort of fellow, I believe, in matters of that kind!’

She was silent for a few moments; then she again turned to her companion.

‘You ken his lordship, maybe?’ she asked.

‘I know him a little,’ he answered, with a peculiar smile. ‘Well, yes, I do know him.’

‘Well, sir?’

He shrugged his shoulders and again became interested in the map.

‘As well,’ he replied, ‘as an out-at-elbow student can know a member of the aristocracy.’

‘Do you like him?’

He laughed very awkwardly this time as he replied :

‘ My dear Miss Macdonald, if you were often to subject me to such a severe cross-examination, I should think you were practising for the bar.’

‘ I am interested in Lord Arranmore.’

‘ I thank you in his name.’

‘ You need not do that, Mr. Lawrance. It is not because I like him, for I do *not*.’

‘ But you don’t know him ?’

‘ No—there is no one in Uribol who does. He became Lord Arranmore and inherited all this land when he was twelve years old, now he is about twenty-four, and he has never once been up to see his home !’

‘ He may have had powerful reasons for staying away.

‘ Then if he has no interest in the land he should have sold it to somebody who had. I am sure if you or any good man

possessed an estate like this, you would not leave it to the care of a wicked factor like Mr. Dougall.'

The young man laughed again.

'Of course you know the saying about old maids' children and bachelors' wives, Miss Macdonald?' he said. 'Although I am fond, as you see, of visiting solitudes such as these, I might not in the character of landlord prove to be one whit better than Lord Arranmore.'

'I suppose,' he continued, after a moment's silence, 'it would be better for you if Lord Arranmore were to come here for at least a part of every year?'

'It would be better for the poor folk,' returned Mina, quietly. 'It would make no difference to us. Lord Arranmore belongs neither to our religion nor our sphere in life, therefore he could never be our friend.'

'Morally he is not one whit your superior ;

surely the difference of religion (if there is any, which I doubt) would not be an insuperable barrier.'

'Maybe not—still, little good ever comes from such friendship as that.'

'Then if he came he would have to shut himself up in Coreveolan Castle and lead the life of a hermit during his stay!'

She smiled brightly.

'Indeed he would not. My uncle and I are not the only folk with whom he could fgather. If he came to Coreveolan Castle he would have heaps of friends of his own.'

'And if he happened to see you, it would either be sailing on the sea or roaming on the sea-shore, as I first saw you. You could guide his yacht to anchor as you did mine, but you would never accord to him the happy privilege of knowing you as you are—yet you accorded that privilege to me.'

'Mr. Lawrance,' said Mina, 'you and

Lord Arranmore are two different folk. Were it not so, you would not be sitting here the now. Do you know what my uncle said when he first heard you were going to call here? "For once we will bid him welcome, but remember, Mina, that a wealthy Englishman is no fit companion for you or for me."'

'He said that?'

'Indeed, then, he did!'

'Then I am glad—very glad that——'

'That—what, sir?' she asked, as he paused in embarrassment.

'Why, that I told him so frankly that I could not boast of worldly possessions at least. Poverty is sometimes a blessing, you see.'

Mina did not answer him. She was gazing steadfastly at a long range of hills which, with the fading light, was fast fading away. While her companion had been

speaking she had not seen his face, but the tone of his voice had sent the hot blood mounting to her cheeks and made her heart beat quickly. Very often while sitting at the window thus, watching the young man's slight figure pass rapidly over the hill, her unspoken thoughts had made the very admission which her companion had now put into words. If the friendship had become a great boon to the stranger—so great a boon as to make him thank the God who had made him poor—what had it become to Mina, she whose whole life had been spent among the fishermen of Uribol? She remembered now what a strange feeling of disappointment had filled her breast when her uncle had said, 'Remember, my bairn, a wealthy young Englishman is no fit companion for you or for me.' She remembered the revulsion which came when she learned that the stranger was com-

paratively poor—so poor as to throw down at once the barrier which Mina had feared would keep him from their house. But although she had felt all this, and admitted it all to herself over and over again, she had never once permitted herself the gratification of believing that her thoughts and feelings had been shared, even in the remotest degree, by their new acquaintance. Indeed, up till that moment her reason had told her that this friendship was to him only a means of passing away a few hours which, under ordinary circumstances, would have hung very heavy on his hands.

She had reasoned all this out again and again after she had bid her uncle good-night, and had retired to her room to sit by her window and dreamily watch the moonlight on the hills—to picture his face, recall every tone of his voice, but never once had she said to herself, ‘ Perhaps he is thinking

of *me*—perhaps it is to see me and to talk to me that he comes so often to the manse, and not to discuss Ossianic literature with my uncle.’ We fancy that if such a thought had ever been inclined to spring up within her she had resolutely forced it away, thinking—‘that is only my stupidity—it is not likely that a fine gentleman like Mr. Lawrance, who has travelled over much of the world, and seen many people, would find it a pleasure to spend evening after evening with *me*. He likes my uncle because he is learned, and a student like himself.’

But she could shut her eyes no longer; whether she would or not, the conviction suddenly forced itself upon her that hitherto she had been totally wrong. Her companion had spoken no words of love to her—he had simply said, ‘Poverty is sometimes a blessing, you see;’ but while saying

this he had managed by the tone of his voice to imply—‘because, through poverty, I have been brought near to *you*.’

Mina was not well versed in love-making—indeed, this was her first experience of anything like the tender passion at all; nevertheless she was not so great a novice as to betray herself altogether. Although she felt that the young man’s words sent through her heart a thrill of happiness which she had never felt there before, although she felt as if an invisible hand was suddenly drawing her to his side—she commanded herself sufficiently to turn from the window and speak to him again.

‘I am very glad,’ she said, with rather more coldness than usual in her tone, ‘and I am sure my uncle will be glad, to ken that we have helped to make your visit here pass pleasantly. We should not like you to carry away unpleasant thoughts of Uribol!’

Mina began the speech bravely, but ere she had ended she dwelt sadly on the words, and the corners of her mouth began to tremble. Lawrance could not see her very distinctly—only the lovely outline of her face—the rounded chin, long curved lashes, and glittering golden hair, but he heard the sweet tones of her voice tremble as she spoke. Bending his head he was about to answer her, when the two were suddenly startled by a voice replying from without:

‘And who is this that is going away, Mina?’

It was the clergyman who spoke. As he uttered the words his tall form emerged from the protecting shades of the twilight, wrapped in his long priestly coat, and with the broad-brimmed hat to shade his eyes. His trousers were rolled up above his ankles, and his thick-soled, laced boots were black with mud.

‘You have had an unpleasant walk, I fear,’ said Lawrance, after he had been warmly shaken by the hand, while Mina asked, as she took his hat and stick and unwound the muffler from his throat:

‘How did you find old Donald, uncle?’

‘Badly, Mina, badly,’ returned the minister, ‘and as much in need of the butcher as the doctor, my bairn. For weeks he has been kept alive on the drops of milk they get from the cow, but last week that scoundrel of a factor went to the hut with two of his men and seized the cow because they couldn’t pay the rent—said his lordship advised him to give short shrift, since indulgence did not pay—that he himself was in want of money for his travels, and must get the rents of Uribol.’

‘He said that,’ interposed Lawrance, hotly, ‘then the man must be a scoundrelly liar!’

The clergyman looked quietly into the young man's flushed face.

'I am afraid,' he said, 'that the factor knows Lord Arranmore better than we do. He would not dare to act as he does, in opposition to his lordship's will. At any rate, if Lord Arranmore is kept in ignorance of individual acts such as this, he is greatly to blame for remaining absent for so many years and leaving the entire management of his estate in the hands of such a man as Mr. Dougall.'

'He may not know the man's character.'

'Then it is clearly his duty to become acquainted with it—to see for himself the kind of thing which takes place on his land, to stop this wholesale murder!'

'Murder!' exclaimed Lawrance.

'What else do you call it, sir, when the only drop of sustenance is taken from the lips of a dying man?'

‘But I will see that the factor restores the cow. I will not permit such things to be!’

The clergyman smiled.

‘If you were Lord Arranmore you would, of course, succeed in your mission—as you are not, you will assuredly fail.’

Lawrance bit his lips.

‘You think so,’ he said. ‘Then perhaps I had better not try. At any rate, no man can hinder me from giving the poor creature some assistance from my own pocket. I have a dislike to visiting such cases myself,’ he added, ‘but if you would use this for the poor creature’s benefit, you would do me a great favour.’

He held forth a couple of sovereigns, which, after a while, the clergyman was persuaded to accept.

‘If there are any other cases which I could assist I hope you will not be

reluctant in telling me of them,' said Lawrance. 'Of course,' he added quickly, noting perhaps a look of surprise on the clergyman's grave face, 'I am not a rich man, but I have managed to save a little, and to what better purpose could my savings be applied than in assisting the unfortunate?'

Then in order to avoid being thanked for his generosity, he quickly turned the conversation into other channels.

Presently he rose to go.

As he shook hands with Mina at the door, he said:

'You will not forget, Miss Macdonald, our engagement for to-morrow?'

'Our engagement?'

'Yes; is it possible you have forgotten? To-morrow is the day on which you were good enough to say you would show me over Coreveolan Castle.'

‘ Oh, yes, I did say so.’

The admission was made so coolly, it induced Lawrance to say, with very much the air of a man who had received an injury :

‘ If you would rather not carry out the compact, you know, perhaps I had better go alone.’

Mina’s cheek flushed, and a half-reproachful look forced itself into her eyes as she looked up into the young man’s face.

‘ Indeed, I shall be very glad to go, if you still care about it. Koll Nicholson will take us in the lug-sail boat as far as Bara Point, and it will be quite easy to walk from there.’

‘ Very well, then ; if the day is fine I will come over as soon after breakfast as I can.’

As he spoke he took her hand, and Mina felt, or thought she felt, that he gave it a

warm pressure. At any rate, the handshake sent the blood rushing again to her cheeks and made her droop her eyes as she wished him 'Good-night.'

As soon as she was in her room that night Mina sat down to wonder if she had done right. Of course she had never once forgotten about the engagement; but ever since he had spoken so softly to her she had been wondering whether or not it would be right for her to go. His tone of disappointment decided her, and she wondered now whether or not her decision had been a wise one. She could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion that night, so she lay down to rest in a very perturbed state of mind.

In the study below the clergyman was pondering over the same theme. While the little scene was being enacted he had sat apart keenly watching the two. He had seen the light on Mina's cheek, the half-

admiring, half-loving look in the young man's eyes, and as he had watched he had wondered if it was incumbent on him to interfere. But he had said nothing—and on reflection he thought that he had done well.

‘Young folk are best left to themselves,’ he thought; ‘he’s a fine young fellow, but after all he’s not one whit better than Mina.’





CHAPTER XIII.

COREVEOLAN CASTLE.

AT seven o'clock the next morning Mina drew aside her window-curtain, and looked anxiously forth. What kind of weather she wanted to see she did not exactly know. She was in a mood to be piqued at anything. When, therefore, she saw that the day was fine, that the hills were bathed in sunlight, the sky was of azure blue, with no sign of clouds anywhere, she drooped the edges of her mouth in real

or feigned disappointment. But the cloud was only transitory, and as it passed away it left her face as bright as the sunlit hills.

She proceeded to dress herself with unusual care. With her the process of dressing was usually a simple one. The means of self-adornment at her command were not large, and as she turned over her small stock of dresses she could find nothing more suitable for the day than the tight-fitting grey tweed which Graham had sent her from the south, and which up to that day she had carefully preserved for evening wear only. Neatly clad in this, she finally descended the stairs and found her uncle awaiting her at the breakfast-table.

A message had been sent to Koll Nicholson that the lug-sail boat would be required ; and when, shortly after breakfast, Mina ran down to the beach, she found it there awaiting her. Koll had been unable to

come, but he had sent two stout young fishermen to do the rowing. The thought of sailing was utterly impracticable—there was not a breath of wind anywhere.

Having satisfied herself that the boating arrangement was complete, Mina was about to return to the house, when she suddenly descried the slight figure of Lawrance coming over the hill. He had evidently been to the manse, for Mina saw that he carried her cloak over his arm. He smiled and nodded when he saw Mina, and pulled off his hat.

‘Who loaded you with all those things for me?’ she asked, for want of something to say.

‘No one; I saw them in the hall, and I appropriated them, and I have no doubt you’ll bless me before the day is over. You see I don’t let my experience of Highland weather count for nothing.’

Mina laughed, and said she wouldn’t

have given him credit for such thoughtfulness; then as the boat was ready he handed her in. It was quite a new experience for Mina to be guarded with such care. In the old times she had been accustomed to place her foot on the gunwale of the boat and spring unassisted to her seat. She prepared to do so on this occasion, but before she knew she found her hands imprisoned in those of Lawrance—his warm pressure continued until she reached her seat; then, when all wants had been carefully attended to, Lawrance took his place by her side, and the boat pushed off.

On the night before, Mina had half-longed, half-dreaded, to be with Lawrance again, but she did not find the trial after all a very hard one. The boatmen could not speak a word of English, and as Lawrance could not understand a word of Gaelic, Mina had all the conversation to herself;

and long before the boat had left the manse half a mile behind, Mina had forgotten all about her nervous foreboding concerning the events of the day.

But no sooner did the keel of the boat grate upon the shingle at Barron Point than Mina began to feel nervous again. There, close to the bow of the boat, stood Mr. Lawrance with outstretched arms, and although she protested, and asserted her ability to help herself, she had in the end to remain very submissive while he lifted her tenderly to shore.

‘It is the only thing you will allow me to do for you,’ he said, ‘and a very poor return it is for all that you have done for me.’

In her confusion Mina had forgotten to speak to the boatmen; Lawrance reminded her of the fact.

‘Owing to my ignorance, Miss Macdonald, I must trouble you to tell these men that,

as we shall not want them again, they had better hasten home.'

'But if they do, how shall we get back?' she asked in amazement.

'If you will only leave it to me,' he returned quietly, 'I will undertake to deposit you at the manse in very good time. But we will not return by water. Although it is fine now, I am enough of a weather prophet to know that we shall have a strong breeze of wind before night, and I don't mean to run the risk of giving *you* a wetting.'

The slight emphasis on the pronoun made Mina blush again, but Lawrance did not see it. She turned to give the necessary orders to the boatmen, then when the boat pushed off she turned and walked away by Lawrance's side.

Since they left Uribol the weather had not changed. There was still no breeze

blowing, and the sun still poured its warm rays upon the earth, but the sky was gradually being covered with a white, feathery film. As Lawrance looked around he felt more than ever glad that they were not going to return by sea. They had a walk of quite half an hour along a narrow footpath which was cut through luxuriant heather and curling ferns, then through a gloomy mountain-gorge, emerging from which they came into full view of Coreveolan Castle, a structure consisting of two dilapidated, round, empty towers, and one tolerably comfortable modern wing.

Lawrance paused.

‘It looks passable from here,’ he said, ‘but I suppose the outside of it must be the best. For many years now the moths and the damp must have had it all their own way.’

‘You must judge it when you have seen

it,' said Mina, and she turned from her companion and led the way to the door.

Although the Laird of Arranmore was a regular absentee the castle had not been left to utter ruin. Certain apartments in it had been placed at the disposal of a widow and her daughter, who, in return for being allowed to live rent free, readily undertook the task of seeing that every other portion of the building, save the two towers, was kept habitable. The castle was never open for public inspection, but, as Mina was very well known to the people who lived in it, she was sure of gaining admittance.

Not only did she gain admittance, but a hearty welcome, and before she was allowed to go over the castle she and her companion were literally forced to partake of a plain lunch, which they were doubtless very much in need of. So, while they ate, Mina was plied with and answered question after

question about her uncle, her home, Graham, who was still in the south, but who was every day eagerly longed for. While she answered these questions, put to her garrulously by the old dame, her companion sat quietly eating and looking on. When they were finished the dame put a bunch of keys in Mina's hand.

'Ye ken the way yersel', my bairn, so gang yer gait. I canna spare the time to come wi' ye mysel', and Maggie must rin ower to Storport.'

In truth, the old woman had nothing whatever to do; but, imagining as she did that Lawrance and Mina were 'courting,' she deemed it only right to leave the young folk alone.

Quite unconscious of this, Mina took the keys and led the way along the gloomy hall into the castle.

The rooms were numerous, but there

were few good chambers among them. Many were unfurnished, and appeared never to have been used at all. The walls, moreover, showed grievous signs of damp. But to Mina's simple eyes the drawing-room, and another saloon adjoining, were magnificent beyond measure. The carpets were rolled up, and the furniture was higgledy-piggledy ; but there were gold cornices round the ceiling, and numberless mirrors on the walls to reflect her face wherever she went. In the dining-hall, an oak-panelled and fairly comfortable room, hung a number of paintings in oil, representing deceased members of the Arranmore family.

Mina thought it was this gloomy grandeur which had depressed and awed her companion. He walked from room to room with a sad, thoughtful look upon his face, though he did not seem so overwhelmed as she thought he would be, by the magnifi-

cence of all he saw. When he came to the family portraits he positively laughed.

‘How they frown,’ he said; ‘it seems to me they resent being shut up amidst all this cobwebby gloom. Well, no wonder; it would make *me* melancholy mad. Which is young Arranmore, Miss Macdonald?’

‘He is not here,’ returned Mina, ‘but they’re saying he is very like *that*!’ she added, pointing to the portrait of an ill-favoured youth in uniform of the Hanoverian period, with a face and head like yellow ochre.

‘Flattering to his lordship, I should say!’

‘Not at all,’ returned Mina, simply. ‘Lord Arranmore is a very braw-looking man!’

‘Indeed!’ returned the young man, with a strange smile. ‘I thought you had never seen him?’

‘Neither I have, but I have heard about him,’ she added quickly. ‘*You* ken him, sir, and you can tell me if I am right.’

‘If you are right?’

‘Yes. Is he bonnie—handsome, I mean?’

‘Well, really, Miss Macdonald, I don’t think I’m a judge of masculine beauty, but I think I can safely say he is not like *that*!’

As he spoke he strode over to a dingy grand piano, opened the lid, and ran his fingers carelessly along the rusty keys.

‘It is being ruined for want of some one to play it,’ he said. ‘You ought to have it over at the manse.’

Mina laughed as she replied :

‘And suppose we had it there, who would play it?’

‘You, of course!’

‘I? I don’t ken a note of music, and cannot even play by ear.’

‘Then it shall remain where it is,’ he said, as he dropped the lid and moved away.

In the next room Mina admired a pair of handsome fire-screens which were fastened to the chimney-piece. Lawrance immediately said :

‘Take them, Miss Macdonald ; they are just what you want for your study at the manse.’ Then, seeing Mina looked shocked, he added : ‘I’ll write to Arranmore, and say *I* took them.’

As he turned it into a joke Mina laughed, and Lawrance did not again attempt to make free with the chattels of his friend.

By two o’clock their inspection of the castle was over, and Mina was beginning to wonder how they were to get back to the manse, when, to her amazement, an open dog-cart and pair came clattering up to the castle door. Lawrance had sent to

Storport and ordered the vehicle, in order that they might enjoy the drive home. Mina said nothing to all this, but when he handed her in, and wrapped the rugs about her before taking his seat too, he noticed that her face was pale and rather grave.

‘Is anything the matter, Miss Macdonald?’ he asked, when the carriage was rolling on its way home.

‘No. I have heard that the young laird is expected ; that is all.’

‘Indeed ! And who told you that, if I may be so rude as to ask ?’

‘The housekeeper at the castle. She has orders to get every room ready for use, as he will certainly be here in hairst, if not before.’

After this there was silence for a time. Lawrance’s prophecy about the weather was being fulfilled : a strong breeze blew from

the west, and rain was beginning to fall. Presently Lawrance spoke again :

‘I thought you were anxious for Lord Arranmore to visit his home?’

‘So I was.’

‘And you are not now?’

‘Well, maybe I ought to be, for it will be better for all the poor folk here; but there is so much dissatisfaction in the place now that I am afraid the laird will not find his visit a pleasant one; and my uncle is on the side of the tenants.’

‘He will act according to his convictions.’

‘Of course, sir; but his convictions might force him to oppose the laird, and it would be very hard for us to live in Uribol if Lord Arranmore became our enemy.’

‘If that is what troubles you, then set your mind at rest.’

Mina raised her eyes to his. She was astonished at the grave look in his face.

She opened her lips to answer him, when he spoke again.

‘So long as I have life and influence,’ he said, ‘believe me, Lord Arranmore shall never bring harm to you or yours.’

‘Mr. Lawrance,’ she answered quietly, ‘you cannot know what you are saying, sir.’

‘Yes, I know what I am saying—I do not speak rashly, Mina. *May* I call you Mina?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Well, since that day when I first met you I have found in this lonely place such happiness as I had formerly searched the world for. You saved my life once. I only ask you now to serve me a little more.’

‘What can I do for you?’ she asked, with trembling lips.

‘*Trust* me, Mina! Put your hand in

mine, and say, "I will have implicit faith—I will——"'

Mina heard no more; her heart was throbbing wildly—her cheeks were crimson. She could not answer him, but she timidly reached forth her hands and put them into his own. Lawrance raised them to his lips, and imprinted upon the fingers one long kiss.

When the carriage drew up at the door of the manse there was half a gale blowing, and the rain had ceased to fall. Lawrance alighted and lifted out Mina. As she stood inside the doorway she saw him lift his hat to her as the carriage bore him away.

Throwing off her hat in the hall, and running to the study, she threw her arms around her uncle's neck and kissed him. At this sudden exhibition of feeling the old clergyman looked up astonished.

‘Why, Mina, my bairn, what ails you?’
he asked.

‘Nothing, uncle—nothing at all—only I
have had such a happy day.’





CHAPTER XIV.

GRAHAM COMES HOME.

SIX weeks after the scene described in our last chapter, the members of a shooting-party were taking their noonday rest among the mountains immediately surrounding Coreveolan Castle.

‘Gott bless my soul, Miss Sedley, you hafe come like an angel from de skies!’ said Baron Bromsen, a little black-eyed, white-haired sportsman, as he sank with an exhausted sigh in the long heather, and gazed up with a feeble smile. ‘Tamnation to these Scotch hills, say I; we hafe been

scrambling up them, and scrambling down them, until I have no scramble left!

His shooting companion, a swarthy gentleman, also advanced in years, laughed as he took his seat on the heather close to the cloth which a dark-eyed young lady, elegantly attired, was spreading out for lunch.

‘You look pretty well played out, baron,’ he said. ‘It strikes me we were both on the point of giving way when we saw the baskets appear. It was a deuced good idea of Ethel’s to bring us a little lunch during our first day on the moor.’

‘Goot!’ echoed the baron, who had by this time somewhat recovered his breath and his colour—‘it was superb—it was sublime!—but she is always so. As I say, she is like an angel which drops from the skies!’

The other sportsman, who, possibly be-

cause the young lady was his daughter, seemed less inclined for rhapsodies than his friend, merely nodded his head and said:

‘Yes, baron, you’re right; Ethel’s a good little girl when she likes.’

Meanwhile the subject of these compliments continued her work as if she did not hear a word. She deftly spread the white cloth upon the heather, emptied the baskets which had been brought with her, poured out the wine for her father and his friend, and when they were both busily employed with their knives and forks, she too sat down amongst the heather, opened her parasol, and indolently looked on.

‘You need not be so free with your compliments, baron,’ she now said. ‘I brought you some luncheon to-day, because—well, because I felt so dreadfully bored, and I couldn’t think of anything else to do!’

Then, turning to her father, she added :

‘ I can’t imagine what induced you to come to this outlandish place !’

‘ To shoot de grouse, to be sure ; and a very good shooting it is,’ said the baron, with a grin. He had imbibed a couple of glasses of champagne, and disposed of a goodly portion of game-pie, and he began to think that to make one of a shooting-party, even on the remote Highlands, was not a bad way of amusing oneself after all.

‘ Ay, yes, of course,’ returned Ethel with a smile, ‘ you have the shooting, but what have I ?’

‘ De scenery,’ said the baron, with a majestic wave of his hand, ‘ and a very good scenery too—look and say if it is not so ?’

The girl smiled again, and, throwing herself back, with the palm of her right hand pressed on the ground and supporting her,

she gave an indolent glance at the wild prospect which surrounded them.

‘Yes,’ she said drily, ‘I have the scenery, and I suppose that ought to satisfy me, but somehow it doesn’t. At first I amused myself by visiting the peculiar-looking huts and studying the natives, but in two days I have exhausted all the amusements of that kind, and now I’ve nothing left. Heigh-ho! I wish we had gone on the Continent, or revisited some of those pretty little German towns.’

‘Don’t be a fool, Ethel,’ returned her father, leaning affectionately towards her, and speaking so low that the attendants who were squatting around on the heather could not hear. ‘We went on the Continent last year and found it a bore. You must be patient. In another week or two his lordship will be here, and then I suppose you will be contented.’

‘Yees,’ put in the baron with a grin, ‘and, if it comes to dat, Miss Sedley might take to some sort of shooting too.’

Ethel frowned.

‘But in the meantime,’ she said, ‘I must content myself with superintending the removal of the empty plates—not a very entertaining occupation, I should have thought, a month ago, but really quite a blessing up here in the Highlands.’

As she ceased speaking another sound struck upon the ears of the little party, causing them to start in wonder. The sound was a shriek of mingled fierceness, horror, and fear, and, looking up, they saw that it came from a figure which stood upon the brow of a hill just behind them—the figure of a man, who, to their unaccustomed eyes, looked as if he had just escaped from Bedlam. His dirty brown kilt exposed a pair of huge horny knees, which were tanned

like a cow-hide ; a mass of fiery red hair shot up from his head like the bristles on a hedgehog's back. He had a game-bag slung across his shoulders, and his long, thin arms flourished about, like the arms of a windmill, waving a Highland cap.

He uttered the shriek ; then, before the party had time to recover from their surprise, came racing wildly down the hill, then, having reached the party so comfortably encamped at the foot, he began gibbering, shrieking, panting, and capering about. In fact, he imitated very well the mad antics of an angry sheep-dog baying at a flock of sheep.

But it must not be supposed that he was long allowed to remain in sole possession of the field. No sooner did he make his appearance at the foot of the hill than the two Highland gillies, who had been in attendance on the gentlemen that morning, and the

sturdy Highlander who had escorted Miss Sedley over the hills, jumped nimbly to their feet, and attacked him with such a ferocious volley of words as almost took away his breath. Little Baron Bromsen, who could never keep cool when a dispute was going on, joined heartily in, heaping upon each one indiscriminately such a medley of broken English and German as would have staggered any cooler men.

Meanwhile Sir Charles Sedley and his daughter, the sole rational beings of the party, had remained coolly looking on, the former from indolence, the latter from amusement ; the fiercer grew the tones of the combatants, the wilder their gestures, the more Ethel laughed, but Sir Charles Sedley at length thought it prudent to interfere.

‘ Baron,’ he said, seizing the little man by the shoulder, ‘ why the deuce can’t you

keep cool?" Then turning to the fierce invader, he added, 'It seems to me, my man, you're either a madman or a fool, and the sooner you make off the better.'

Then he addressed his own servants and asked, 'What the devil is the idiot raving about?'

'He was asking,' returned one of the gillies quietly, 'if we didna ken that we had crossed the mearn.'

'Well, it seems to me,' returned the baronet, with an indolent smile, 'that he needn't have wasted so much exercise in asking that.' Then, turning again to the frantic Highlander, he asked, 'Suppose we *have* crossed the boundaries, what's that got to do with you?'

'What is that to *me*!' returned the man, speaking for the first time in English. 'Is not this the land of the Macpherson of Pherson?—am I not the gamekeeper of the

Macpherson of Pherson?—and is it right that the land of the Macpherson of Pherson should be trespassed upon at all, at all?’

‘Bosh,’ said Sir Charles, coolly. ‘What harm have we done the moor by having our lunch beside the brook? Ethel,’ he continued, turning to his daughter, ‘you’re the culprit, remember—you found out the shady nook, so you’ll have to make our apologies to the Macpherson; but it strikes me,’ he added, with a laugh, ‘that if the Macpherson, whoever he is, were here, he wouldn’t turn out to be such a fool as his keeper.’

‘You are right, sir,’ returned a voice, and every member of the little party knew that another individual had joined in the discussion.

At the sound of the voice all eyes were instantly turned upon the new-comer, who for the last minute or two had commanded

the undivided attention of Miss Sedley alone. He was a tall, muscular young man of about five-and-twenty, who wore the English costume, and carried a thick shepherd's stick in his hand. Behind him stood a fisher lad, carrying a small port-manteau and leading a rough deerhound.

The moment the young man spoke, the Highlander, who had described himself as one of the Macpherson's keepers, uttered a yell of delight, and seizing him by the hand, wrung it wildly, and burst into a torrent of Gaelic, evidently a sort of Highland welcome. The young man laughed good-humouredly, and clapped him on the shoulder; then said a word or two in Gaelic, upon which the keeper drew back.

Turning again, the young man regarded the shooting-party with a gloomy smile; his eyes suddenly meeting those of Miss Sedley,

he courteously removed his hat ; then turning towards her father, he said :

‘ Pray do not disturb yourselves.’ As no one seemed inclined to answer him he continued, ‘ If you find this spot more pleasant than elsewhere I am sure you would be welcome to stay. Donald here is a little over-zealous, and forgets the respect due to strangers.’

‘ May I ask your name, sir, and whether you are a native of these parts?’

‘ My name is Macdonald,’ answered the young man, quietly ; ‘ and I have just come from the south. The steamer’s small boat landed me off the headland yonder, and I was making my way across the hills.’

Here the gamekeeper broke in eagerly in English.

‘ Oh, Master Graham, it is wild Miss Mina will be to see you come hame! and

it is wild all the folk in Uribol will be this night !'

And again he wrung the young man's hand, and burst into Gaelic. Just then Sir Charles Sedley rose to his feet and took up his gun.

'Now we've finished our luncheon, I think we had better be on the move again. We were just thinking about going when your countryman here came down like a maniac and attacked us.'

'I am very sorry,' returned the young man, gravely.

'Oh, not at all—no need to apologise for him ; it's my daughter who ought to apologise to the Macpherson. She brought up the luncheon, and found out the place, and made us camp here, and deuced pleasant it's been,' continued the baronet, looking at his watch, 'for the time has flown. Good-afternoon, sir. Come along, baron. Ethel,

SECOND OF NATURE.

'You will have to find your way back
as you came.'

But the young lady could protest, the
baron had walked off, dragging the
unwilling baron in his wake,
and bidding to the gillies to follow.

Being thus so unceremoniously left to
themselves, the young people did not know
very well what to do. Macdonald, unde-
cided whether to walk off or remain,
adopted the latter course from sheer em-
barrassment. Accordingly he stood looking
confusedly, and somewhat sullenly, at
Miss Sedley ; while she, with all the *sang*
froid in the world, gravely ordered her
attendant to pack up the empty plates
and glasses, and carry them quickly
home.

When this was done, and she was about
to depart, she suddenly seemed to remember
that she was not alone. For the first time

she looked full in the young man's face and smiled.

'Are you waiting for me to cross the boundaries, sir?' she asked; then she added quickly, noting the grave look on the young man's face: 'Perhaps the best reparation I can make is to leave the forbidden spot at once. Good-day.'

She bowed her head, and was about to pass on, when Macdonald stopped her.

'I beg your pardon; I have no more to do with the land than yourself. The fact is, I was rude, and was wondering to see strange folk on these hills.'

'Indeed?'

'It is not often we see strange faces here. May I ask your name, madam?'

'Mine? Oh, my name is Miss Sedley; that gentleman who spoke to you is my father; the other is his friend, Baron Brom-

sen ; and we live in the castle over yonder on the hill-side.'

'Then I think we have met before,' said Graham. 'Do you know Lady Murray ?'

'Of Edinburgh? Oh yes—the queer old Highland lady who takes “sneesh,” as she calls it, and talks as broad as a spade. Perhaps I saw you at her house ?'

'I think so. I—I have a good memory for faces. Lady Murray is a distant kinswoman of my own.'

'Indeed?' murmured Ethel with a shrug.

'Yes,' said the young man. 'But I see you are in haste, and I will not detain you. Good-day.'

And before she could say another word he lifted his hat and strode away.

The fisher-boy, as if catching the reflection of his mood, walked behind him with hanging head, while beside him strolled the

keeper, still casting reproachful glances back at the figures who had thus openly dared to trespass on his master's ground. For some time the young man walked on, silent and thoughtful; at length he paused upon the brow of a hill, sank down among the heather, and gazed at the prospect which opened up around him. Not critically or with surprise, for he knew every varying look of the landscape by heart.

It was a scene, nevertheless, which it would be difficult to match even in Scotland for combined splendour and terror of natural effect. Far below him, creeping in in one long, glimmering arm through the heart of the hills, now hidden by heathery promontories, now stretching out into broad and glistening bays, lay Loch Siloart, and in one of its most sheltered creeks, on the very edge of the strand, lay a white shooting-lodge. Far away at the mouth of the

loch, beyond the lodge, a red-sailed fishing-smack was becalmed on a patch of perfect blue. On either side of the fjord the hills were low, and covered with heather from base to summit. But as the arm of the sea crept inland the hills grew wilder and steeper, till, above its furthest extremity, there rose a range of livid mountains stretching in jagged lines against the faint pink sky. These mountains dominated the entire scene. The purple heather clung around their base, but from centre to peak they were sheer scalps of naked volcanic stone. In the calm light of the autumn afternoon they looked almost soft and still, and on the horn of the highest, Ben Glamaig, one bright silvern star was beginning to glimmer: but their general aspect, and the tone they gave to the entire scene, was one of utter silence and desolation.

For some time Macdonald remained

moveless, with his eyes on the sea far beneath him. Presently his attention was attracted to the shooting-party, which was slowly and laboriously ranging the heathery slopes below ; now pausing, as a dog stood stiff and silent in advance of the party ; now firing, with a sharp sound soon swallowed up in the mountain silence, and leaving a tiny wreath of smoke to ascend and join the faint white wreaths which circled round the hill-tops.

A somewhat contemptuous smile passed over the young Highlander's face as he beckoned his wild acquaintance to him.

‘Do you ken those folk, Donald?’ he said, in Gaelic. ‘How long have they been at the castle?’

‘They will have been at the castle since a week,’ answered the keeper ; and he continued garrulously, ‘They will be saying he is vera rich, and that his companions are

vera rich, and that the leddy is a great leddy ; but for all that they had no right to cross the mearns. And with my own een I saw them find a pack on the Macpherson's ground, and when they fired only one bird fell, and it was a grey hen, and the Macpherson doesna shoot the grey hens ; and a snipe got up under the wee fat man's nose, and when he missed it he began to sweer.'

'Have they rented Sloachan Forest as well as Muir o' Lairg ?' asked Macdonald, impatiently. 'I never heard that it was let.'

'Na, it isna set, for these English will only shoot the grouse, and indeed it would be a peety to let them disturb the deer.'

And with a sort of sovereign contempt the keeper gazed down on the party, who were now making the welkin ring with shouts. One of the dogs was in wild pursuit of a hare, and the baron, with his hat off, was yelling and gesticulating wildly.

The deerhound pricked up his ears, and seemed about to spring away, when a sharp word from his master restrained him.

The same supercilious smile, expressive of much the same contempt as that felt by his attendant, passed across the young man's face.

‘If you are going down to the clachan,’ he said, ‘see if Rone, the smith, has finished the lock of my rifle; I left it with him when I went away: if so, bring it with you. Take Shon with you; I shall cross the hill.’

A minute later the keeper took a path down the hill-side, followed by the fisher-boy and the dog; Macdonald passed slowly upward.

His pace was languid, and his appearance was that of a man in a brown study. At every step he took the heather grew more and more scanty, the hill more stony and bare.

‘What has come o’er me, I wonder? Is it that English lassie’s face?’

His own fair face took a heightened colour as he uttered the surmise. As if impatient with himself he strode on. But his thoughts still flowed in the same current.

‘Curious folk, not unlike many of these sporting English; but the lassie is something different. What eyes she has! great black piercing eyes, such as one does not often see in the north. And her shape—as lithe and graceful as a red deer’s—a proud little devil, I should say! She looked me from top to toe as if I were of no more account than Donald, or one of their own gillies!’

Thus thinking, and sometimes muttering to himself, he reached the hill-top, and passing rapidly along the summit, soon found himself upon another and wilder mountain,

rising precipitously as if into the very sky. It seemed a terrible ascent, but following a track evidently well known to him, he mastered it with careless ease. Nothing but rocks and boulders stretched on every side. The heat was intense, though every crag and peak was now crimson with the setting sun. And now at last he saw far below the waters of Loch Uribol, and in one green spot the clachan, with its white lodge—the house of the village pastor.

For a few moments he rested upon the brow of the mountain, gazing at the clachan below, then he rapidly descended.

The sun was setting as he entered the village, and walked with long, swift strides towards the lodge. As he drew near he saw that the door was open, and that a figure sat on a stool close beside it.

The figure was that of a young man, no other indeed than Mr. Lawrance, who,

dressed in his loose shooting-suit, was lazily sorting some fishing-tackle which he held in his hand. Macdonald paused in wonder; as he did so, Lawrance raised his head, and the young men regarded each other with a steadfast stare.

Neither spoke. The sullen look—half of wonder, half of resentment—deepened on Macdonald's face, while Lawrance's animated features soon broke into an amused smile.

‘Who is this?’ he seemed to say: ‘and by what right does he seem to question my presence here?’

Suddenly, and before either could say a word, there was an unlooked-for interruption. Lawrance was startled by a glad cry which came from the window of the house. The next moment he was amazed to see Mina rush eagerly forth and throw her arms around the neck of her brother.



CHAPTER XV.

BY THE FIRESIDE.

SEVERAL hours later, when the village lay enshrouded in darkness, a happy party gathered in the great kitchen at the manse. Mr. Macdonald sat in the ingle quietly smoking his pipe, Lawrance had ensconced himself close by, while near them sat Mina, her face turned towards her brother Graham, her lips questioning him minutely as to his doings since he went away.

During the last few hours Graham had gone through so much exertion, both mental

and physical, that he seemed now utterly disinclined for intercourse of any kind. The news of his arrival had spread like lightning, and very soon the cottage had been besieged by wild figures innumerable who had come to give him a welcome home. Under this benign influence the sullen expression which had at first darkened his face gradually wore away. He had cheerfully complimented Angus, who was still in the village, on the good looks of his canine family ; he had run down to the beach to see Shamus Beg's new fishing skiff ; he had explained to some of the croft-holders the kind of machines which were used for tilling the land in the south ; and last, though not least, he had made old Koll Nicholson happy by promising to go with him on the following day to fish some of the best pools in the broad burn which runs through Coreveolan.

But when at length the cottage was still again, when darkness had driven the people to their homes, and Graham found himself seated quietly in the great kitchen with Mina by his side, the sullen look began to cloud his features again, and, as he glanced from time to time at the young man who sat so coolly in the shadow, it deepened more and more. He evidently looked upon him as an unwelcome intruder—a sort of cloud on the happiness of the family circle—and, though Mina had hurriedly explained that Lawrance was a stranger—a student like himself, who had been made welcome by her uncle, and who had Lord Arranmore's permission to do as he chose in the place—the explanation did not break down the barrier which had at first kept them apart.

So Graham sat grimly tolerant, answering Mina's questions in monosyllables, and

glancing from time to time across at the stranger.

‘How long do you intend to stay, Graham?’ asked Mr. Macdonald at length, and Graham answered quietly:

‘Till hairst only. Then I must go south for a month.’

‘And when you come home again,’ interposed Mina, quickly, ‘you must let us ken some time before. Then we will have a welcome for you. We will have a fire lit on the topmost peak of Benveolan, and Koll Nicholson’s smack will go to Storport to bring you in, and Shamus Beg will bring out his pipes to play you a welcome.’

‘Or, if *I* am here,’ put in Lawrance, ‘I shall be most happy to put the *Jenny* at your service. She is not a first-rate yacht, as you know, Miss Macdonald, but she would be more suitable for your brother to return in than old Nicholson’s smack.’

Graham laughed uneasily, then his cheek flushed as he glanced towards Lawrance's shrouded face.

'Thanks, Mina,' he said ; 'but if it is all the same to you, I would rather not be made to look like a gowk. Such exhibitions might have suited the days when there were Highland chieftains to welcome home; they are out of date now. A pretty figure I should have looked to-day stalking over the hills with a ragged army of croft-holders behind me, and a ragged piper before, especially in the eyes of the fine party who were bivouacking on the hills!'

'Who were *they*, Graham?' asked Mr. Macdonald.

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

'I cannot tell; strangers, I should fancy; at least they were strangers to me, but you may know of them. Donald attacked them

as if they had been pickpockets, for the gentlemen were shooting on Lord Arranmore's land, and had trespassed on the ground of the Macpherson.'

Up to this point Lawrance, as we have said, had sat apart, content for once to be dropped out of the family circle, to loll in his easy-chair, smoke his cigar, and listen indolently, but with little interest, to the conversation which was being carried on, but suddenly he raised himself, and, looking at Graham, asked quietly:

'Strange gentlemen, did you say, shooting on my land?'

'I beg your pardon,' returned Graham, quietly; 'I said they were on Lord Arranmore's.'

Lawrance laughed lightly, and leaving his chair, took up his position on the hearthstone, with his back to the fire. His face

was still in shadow, but the faces of the others were in bright light.

‘Thank you,’ he returned. ‘I should have said Lord Arranmore’s land ; but you see I have an easy way of assuming proprietorship of my friend’s goods. The fact is, I have had such unlimited sway since I came here, that I sometimes feel as if the land were my own.’

‘What like were the strangers, Graham?’ asked Mina.

She was more interested in them than in the fact that Lawrance had by a slip of the tongue laid claim to the Arranmore estates.

‘Don’t you know?’ said Graham, astonished. ‘Indeed, Mina, I took small heed of them. The lady told me their names, but I forget them ; but I know there was an old gentleman who had a gun, two gillies, several dogs, and a foreigner who was

making noise enough to disturb all the game lying between this and Ben-veolan !'

'It is very strange we have never seen them !' continued Mina. 'I'm wondering who they can be !' Then, turning to Lawrance with a smile, she added : 'Maybe, sir, now you have set the fashion, we shall have plenty of visitors to Uribol.'

At this prophecy Lawrance did not look over well pleased.

'When I came here,' he said, sweeping his eyes carelessly over each of the three faces before him, 'I was under the impression that Loch Uribol did not see a strange countenance more than about once in a quarter of a century.'

'And in a measure you were right,' returned Mr. Macdonald. 'It is not a place affording much attraction to tourists, and those who would have cared to visit it could

find no accommodation. These strangers, whoever they are, cannot be residents here, unless, indeed, they are the shooting tenants of Castle Coreveolan.'

'That is probable,' said Lawrance, quietly.

'Perhaps,' continued Mr. Macdonald, 'they are the people who have bought the Coreveolan estates. I know they changed hands several months ago, and what is more likely than that the new purchaser should wish to visit his property in person? I am thankful to say that all Highland lairds are not as careless over their property as the young Lord of Arranmore.'

As the minister finished speaking Lawrance shot one swift, keen glance into his face, then with a yawn he threw himself into his chair again.

'Well, whoever they are, I hope they won't interfere with my amusements,' he

said, 'and then good luck attend them, say I. Mr. Macdonald, may I offer you the "pipe of peace" before I take my leave?'

As he spoke he drew forth a cigar-case, opened it, and held it towards Graham. The movement was so sudden and unexpected that for the moment Graham was taken aback. He hesitated, then after an appealing look from Mina he stretched forth his hand and took a cigar.

'Thanks,' he said sullenly, 'but as I'm o'er tired to smoke to-night, I'll keep it till another day.'

And he put it on the table behind him.

As Lawrance handed a cigar to the minister, and took one for himself, he shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

'All right,' he returned carelessly; 'please yourself and you will please me. I hope we shall continue to be good friends, for I perceive with pleasure that our tastes harmonise

tolerably well. You will be beating the hills yourself, I presume. I am sure,' he added quickly, 'my friend Arranmore, who is not a bad fellow at heart, would not in the least object if *you* were to make a little free with his game.'

'But I should prefer before I did so to ask his lordship's permission !'

'Not in the least necessary, I assure you,' returned Lawrance. 'I will make my permission do duty for both !'

As this speech called for no actual reply, Graham gave none, and Lawrance, perhaps feeling the silence which followed a little irksome, politely took his leave.

'The sullen young cub,' he said to himself as soon as he was alone ; 'if I had my will, I would have him whipped into good behaviour !'

For several hours after he had gone, the little party sat in the kitchen talking over

old times. After the minister had retired, Mina sat for a while with her brother alone.

Presently she asked, glancing half timidly in his face :

‘ Well, Graham, what do you think of him ?’

‘ Of whom, Mina ?’

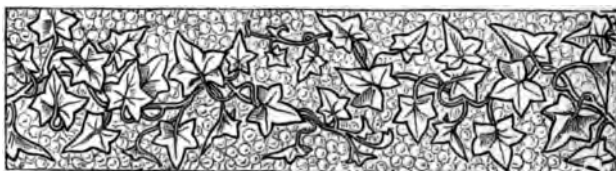
‘ Of Mr. Lawrance—the gentleman who was here to-night.’

In a moment all the brightness faded from Graham’s countenance. He answered her question by another.

‘ How long have you kenned him, Mina ?’

‘ For several weeks. He is a college friend of the young laird, and he is allowed to do whatever he wishes on the land !’

Graham said no more, but as he was leaving the room his eye fell upon the cigar which Lawrance had handed him. He threw it into the fire.



CHAPTER XVI.

KOLL.

BY six o'clock the next morning most of the members of the minister's little household were astir. Graham was the last to appear. During his sojourn in the south he had cast off, with many other of his Highland accomplishments, the habit of early rising, so when the breakfast was quite cold he came down looking only half refreshed.

‘You have been studying o’er hard, Graham!’ said Mina, looking affectionately at his pale cheeks. ‘The fresh air of

Uribol will do you good; it was well for you that you came home.'

'Yes,' said the clergyman, quietly, 'it is not good for a young fellow like Graham to dwell so long in the smoky south!'

Graham only laughed; and, taking his seat with them at the table, soon turned the conversation into other channels.

The meal was hurried over, for the minister had to attend a sick call, and Graham proposed that he and Mina should run down the coast to Koll Nicholson's hut, and pay the old man a visit. To this Mina readily consented, and as soon as their uncle had departed Graham and his sister set off. Mina had not seen her brother for more than three years, and the little shyness of her first meeting with him having by this time completely worn away, she found that she had a hundred things to say. So, as they walked over

the hill in the glorious sunshine, she held his hand and chattered away freely; and when they were on the sea he made her sit in the stern of the boat and let him row her—while he in his turn told her of the wonderful things which he had seen in the south. But neither of them mentioned Lawrance. Mina often thought of him, but somehow she felt instinctively that the mention of the name was not calculated to bring the brightness into her brother's face.

After about half-an-hour's swift rowing Graham suddenly turned the boat and ran it ashore, and, on Mina springing lightly out, he fastened the painter around a huge boulder which lay half embedded in the sand. Then the two turned their steps towards a hut which stood upon the beach in the shadow of an overhanging crag. The oval roof of this strangely situated dwelling was formed of the upturned

hull of an old fishing smack, while the walls were fashioned of loose pieces of rock and stones which had evidently been collected from the shore. About it, in time of storm, the salt sea-spray was wafted; around it the sea-weed clung; on the rocks near it the cormorants swarmed and the sea-gulls screamed; here and there about the weed-covered crags the sea-pie flashed, while far away to sea the gannet shot like a stone upon his prey. But now, save for the low, monotonous sighing of the waves upon the shore, all was still as death. The sun-rays beat fiercely upon the glittering sea, the purple hills, the jagged cliffs; and all the living things in the water and on the land lifted their eyes to the bright smiling of the summer sky.

A hundred yards from the shore a great fishing smack lay at anchor, with her red sails outspread upon the deck, her shadow

dancing in the water below her, while on the shore, right opposite the hut, a rough punt lay secured by a strong rope to the grapnel which lay embedded in the sand.

With a gentle motion of her hand, and one finger laid upon her lips in token of silence, Mina motioned her brother to keep back, while she advanced with swift and silent tread, until she stood before the half-open door of the cabin. The room which this half-open door revealed was of moderate dimensions, and in every way harmonised with the external appearance of the hut. The floor was paved with small round stones, which were carefully placed and brightly polished; dried fish, coils of rope, and fishing-lines hung from the rafters, which were black as ebony. In one corner stood a pair of rudely made oars, and in another, carefully folded, was a red canvas

lug-sail. At the upper end of the floor a small square space was left unpaved, and on this smouldered away two or three clods of peat.

The only occupant of the room was a very old man, who sat on a small stool close beside the smouldering fire, busily at work repairing great rents in an old fishing-net which was spread on the floor before him. His face, despite constant exposure to sun and wind, was of that ashen-grey hue which is usually found only on the faces of the dead. His hair, which was as white as snow, was carefully smoothed off his forehead. His eyes were sunken, and around them was a jet-black ring, which gave to his face a ghastly look. His brows were contracted into an habitual frown, and the general expression of his face was wild and sad.

His figure was big, angular, and bony.

He wore a blue guernsey, which was dim with age and full of darns, and a pair of trousers made of some rough blue stuff, which looked as if it was saturated with the salt sea-spray.

Although he was seventy years of age his back was straight as an arrow, as he sat upon his stool grimly pursuing his work, and glancing up occasionally to look at the sunshine which was creeping in at his half-open door.

A shadow was flung across the floor, and quickly raising his eyes, he saw Mina standing upon the threshold of the hut. All at once the pinched face seemed to brighten, the features to expand. It was as if one waft of an invisible hand had brought a new brightness to the dim, sad eyes, a glow of colour to the faded, withered cheeks.

Then in a moment it all faded, and the

old man turned his face, now greyer than ever, towards his work.

‘Come in, my bairn,’ he said, and as he spoke there was a querulous ring in his voice. ‘Dinna stand there to keep oot the sunlight frae her ; ’tis aal the brightness she has left.’

Mina ran across the floor, passed her arm round the old man’s neck, and pressed her warm, red lips to his cheek.

‘Don’t say that, Koll,’ she whispered ; ‘you’ve got *me*.’

Again that indescribable look of brightness flashed across the old man’s face, and faded. When he answered her it was in the usual querulous tones.

‘You !’ he said ; ‘and what for should she count *you* ? Is it because you come sae often to see her ?’

At this a sudden pang shot through Mina’s heart.

‘Indeed, I have not been often to see you lately, Koll,’ she said ; ‘because we have had company, and I’ve been needed at home.’ She added, smiling slyly: ‘Since you do not want me now that I have come, why, I can just go home again.’

She began gently to withdraw her hand from his neck, but Koll clutched it in his, and said softly :

‘Mina, ma bairn, dinna heed ta old man; sit ye down and tell her the news. She’s jest a peevish old man, that should be whippit for flyting ye at aal, at aal.’

So Mina laughed and kissed the old man’s cheek, then she went to the door and waved in her brother.

Koll threw aside his nets and extended his hard, horny hand to give him a welcome.

‘You will hae grown a praw lad,’ he said, surveying him carefully from head to foot—

‘a praw lad indeed, but your hands are o’er white, and your cheek is o’er white, and ye’ll no ken how to sail a boat like Mina. But ’tis nae fault o’ yours, laddie—’tis the fault o’ them wha sent ye awa’ sooth to learn book learning and forget the land o’ your forebears.’

Feeling rather small under all this solemn censure, Graham began to tell of some of the wonders which he had seen in the south. To all this the old man listened grimly, with a smile of incredulity upon his face.

Presently Graham put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a neat leathern case. Springing this open, he discovered a prettily-carved meerschaum pipe lying upon a bed of purple velvet.

‘See here, Koll,’ he said, ‘I brought this for you! ’Tis a pipe made out of the foam of the sea!’

The old man took the case, lifted the pipe carefully, and examined it.

‘’Twas like ye to remember auld Koll Nicholson,’ he said ; ‘you’re a goot lad and a kind lad, put dinna ask her to pelieve that this braw toy was made oot o’ the flashes o’ foam upon the sea !’

Graham laughed.

‘ You don’t believe it ?’

The old man gravely shook his head.

‘’Tis like fleeing in the face o’ Got Almighty to say sic-like things !’

Mina, being afraid of an unpleasant discussion, here broke in quickly :

‘ Koll, are you going to Storport fair on Monday ?’

‘ Why is it you ask, ma bairn ?’

‘ Because I want to go, and so does Graham, and uncle——’

‘ And the strange shentleman,’ asked Koll, quietly.

Mina blushed, and turned away her head.

‘If he wishes to go he has his yacht,’ she returned; ‘but *we* mean to go in the smack.’

As she spoke she walked towards the door. The quiet mention of Lawrance’s name had made her feel rather uncomfortable, and she seemed all at once eager to bring the interview to a close. So she stood there with her face turned to the sunlit sea, and talked for a few minutes over the plan of running the smack to Storport; then with her brother she took her leave.

For a time the old man stood at the door, shading his eyes with his withered hand from the dazzling sunlight, and watched the boat as it bore the two figures away. There it went, gliding softly along the smooth surface of the fjord, but growing ever

dimmer and dimmer in the dazzling sheen of light. Presently Mina waved her handkerchief, Graham waved his hat, then the boat turned a corner quickly and disappeared.





CHAPTER XVII.

THE FAIR AT STORPORT.

FIFTEEN miles from Uribol, as you sail southward along the coast, opens Loch Storport, and at the head of the loch stands the town, or village, or clachan, of Storport, consisting of a public-house, a shed for dried fish, and some hundred white-washed cottages clustering round a white-washed school. Several miles in the interior are churches of various denominations — Protestant and Roman Catholic — desolate-looking edifices in the midst of a desolate country. Indeed, a

more cheerless prospect than Storport, and the country surrounding it, can scarcely be conceived—a flat, green, marshy district, broken up with innumerable lakes and tarns, and rising only occasionally into small hills.

The broken-down-looking inn of Storport—a one-story edifice without ‘sign’ of any sort—stands at the head of a large pier or wharf, and for nine months out of ten stares with two glazed and fishy-looking eyes at the cheerless waters broken with damp green islands, projecting reefs, and floating weed. The landlord wanders away wherever business or pleasure leads him, and a dirty servant roams to and fro through rooms innocent of the taste of whisky or the smell of smoke. But suddenly in the spring of the year the fishy eyes of the inn begin to sparkle, and to blaze later on into the evening with a red and festive glare. The herring-fishers, like a swarm of locusts,

have descended upon Loch Storport, and the whole district is alive with the signs of life.

The day following Graham Macdonald's return to Uribol two men sat in the dark, dusky, desolate-looking parlour of the Storport inn, sharing the contents of a gill measure of whisky, and looking out of the dingy window.

One was a little red-haired, red-faced irascible-looking person, who, though of very vulgar cut, sported a sealskin waistcoat and a massive gold chain. The other was Peter Dougall, better known as Peter-na-Croiche, or 'gallows' Peter, the humble representative of Lord Arranmore on the estate of Uribol.

'There'll pe a heap o' folk at the fair, Mister Tougall,' observed the red-faced man, speaking English through the nose with a strong Gaelic accent, 'and a heap o' fine

peasts. Will you pe for puying yoursel', Mister Tougall ?'

'No a heid, no a horn, Mr. Macraw ; but I'll be for *selling*. I've some yews to sell for a fair price. You shall see the peasts for yoursel'—fine cattle! praw cattle! and worth tooble the money I ask for them, if you tak' them to the sooth.'

'Hoo muckle will ye pe asking for the yews, Mister Tougall?' cried Mr. Macraw, eagerly.

'How muckle? Just seeventeen sheelings, Mr. Macraw.'

'Seeventeen sheelings! That's a pig price for a yew!'

'Praw cattle!'

'Hoo mony may there pe o' them, Mister Tougall?'

'Just twa score, Mr. Macraw. You shall see them for yoursel'.'

'Mister Tougall, you're a tecent man—

will you tak' fifteen sheelings and a crown over the whole twa score?'

The old man shook his head. Then ensued a fresh dialogue, very energetically sustained by the red-faced man, who at last concluded a bargain to his satisfaction, and bought the ewes at what he considered a fair price.

'And hoo's aal wi' ye at Uribol, Mr. 'Tougall?' he observed, drinking in a more benignant frame of mind. 'Have you had a veesit yet from the young laird?'

'No, Mr. Macraw.'

'Is it no strange that the young shentleman has never thought of veesiting this part of his dominions?'

'Strange! And why is it strange, Mr. Macraw?'

'Becase, sir, a shentleman would naturally tesire to look at his ain ground, and to

see if it was goot ground—and if the rents was goot.'

'What do shentry ken o' these things, Mr. Macraw? Lord Arranmore is put a lad, and for all that I ken he couldna tell a pleugh frae a harrow, or a tup frae a yew.'

'That's true, Mister Tougall. Hoo old is the young laird, did you say?'

'Three or four-and-twenty, Mr. Macraw, or thereabouts.'

'Three-and-twenty, and the owner of aal that land! He's a lucky shentleman, Mr. Tougall.'

'I don't ken what you mean by lucky, Mr. Macraw, but he's a *puir* man.'

'Puir, Mr. Tougall?'

The factor nodded.

'Hoo can that pe, sir?' demanded Mr. Macraw, sharply. ''Tis goot land.'

'The land's goot enough—goot enough for the Hielands.'

‘And the rents are goot?’

‘So they are, Mr. Macraw.’

‘Then, what way are you telling me that the laird is poor, Mr. Tougall?’

‘Because, Mr. Macraw, there’s no a yaird of it, from the Point of Raw to the Sound of Coil, put should be doon in sheep; because, sir, the laird should be getting rent for every airmful of kelp that’s burnt on the foreshores of the estate; because it’s covered with the scum o’ the earth, Mr. Macraw—lazy peasts of men and women that should pe shippit across the sea.’

‘Pless me, Mr. Tougall, would ye clean awa’ the population aaltogether?’

‘If I had my will I would treble the rent in five years. I would have none upon the estate but the shepherds, and I wad hire hands from the sooth to make kelp in the season, and I would tak’ it to my ain market, for my ain price.’

‘Tear me!’ ejaculated the red-faced man, who, although of insolent, irascible manners, was quite staggered by this proof of unscrupulousness far beyond his darkest conception. ‘Tear me!’ he repeated. ‘You’re an awfu’ man, Mr. Tougall. Hae ye spoken of this to the laird?’

‘The auld laird knew nae mair o’ the land than this gill-stoup, Mr. Macraw, and the young laird is no muckle better. Did I no tell the auld laird again and again to clear the land?’

‘Maybe, maybe; but he refused, Mr. Tougall?’

‘He did little, Mr. Macraw, but through my advice he pu’ed doon mony a hoose that was a disgrace to ceevilisation, and shippit awa’ mony a lazy loon that encumbered the good land. He would ha’ done mair, and if he had done mair the estate wouldna pe in its present shameful condeetion, and he

himself would never hae died in debt. Put if I had my will I would clear every clachan on the land, and turn oot the clergy.'

'The clergy, Mr. Tougall! What have the clergy done?'

'They're the curse of the Hielands, Mr. Macraw.'

'Be careful, Mr. Tougall. I'm a goot Chreestian, and a brither of my ain is in the Kirk.'

'I care neither for you nor your brither, Mr. Macraw,' cried the factor, warm with his theme, not to speak of the whisky. 'The clergy are the ruin of the soil, and the makers of the poor; they steer up discord and dissension, Mr. Macraw, and they persuade the servant to rise against his laird.'

'Why are you sae sair on the clergy, Mr. Tougall?' cried the red-faced man, awed by what seemed to him this tremendous language bordering on blasphemy.

‘I will tell you, Mr. Macraw. You are acquaint with Macdonald, the minister of Uribol?’

‘Oh, I am, Mr. Tougall.’

‘If I had my will that man should be drooned in the loch at his ain door. What does the likes of him do writing letters by the post to the laird in London, and making oot that it would be a sin to clear the land, and that the laird should come and judge the case wi’ his ain e’en.’

‘Was that pad advice, Mr. Tougall?’

‘Was it good advice, Mr. Macraw? What do the likes of shentry know aboot the land? Fast as I tried to work for the goot of the land, the tammed meenister interfered and frichted the laird oot of doing as I bade him. Would you believe, Mr. Macraw, once when the laird was pad, vera pad wi’ the gout, and I had written a letter, advising him to turn out the folk from Plabba Island, and

give it to my ain son for sheep at tooble the rent, wad ye believe that Macdonald made oot a petition wi' his ain hands, and made every man, woman, and child put their mark to the petition, and sent it to the laird by the post with a long letter beside, Mr. Macraw, sae full o' the threat o' hell-fire and tamnation that the old man was nearly driven oot o' his wits, and wrote off to me at once to let the people pe, whether they paid their rent or no! Think of that, Mr. Macraw, and don't ask me again why I caal the clergy the curse o' the land.'

'It's an awfu' thing to turn poor folk oot o' hoose and hame, Mr. Tougall! It's a dreadful responsibeelity.'

'Sae it is, Mr. Macraw; but if it's for their ain goot? They ruin the goot land, and they're eaten up wi' hunger and disease, when oot yonder in America there's millions o' miles o' arable land

to be had for the asking. The land here was made for sheep. It'll no' grow a crop, and it canna feed a man. It is my opinion, Mr. Macraw, that it's not goot for Highlandmen to remain at hame. See them here, and it'll make your heart plead for their idleness and their miserable ways ; see them in America, and they're praw men, earning goot wages and working weel.'

Peter Dougall, who gave his opinion thus freely on the state of the islands, was really quite sincere in every word he said. He believed that the population merely encumbered the land, and that it was benefiting both them and his employers to transfer them bodily to the United States. He had no tender scruples, however, as to the execution of his desires, and he had again and again urged upon the owner of the estate that he should give him power to adopt far

more stringent measures with the population.

Unfortunately for all parties concerned, the hereditary owners of Uribol had never for several generations visited this part of their possessions. In the first place, because it was very inconvenient to reach, and very uncomfortable when reached; in the second place, because they spent almost all their time abroad, and only came to London a few weeks during the season; and in the third place, because the Uribol property, although it embraced altogether a very large area of land, was in reality so barren and so badly cultivated as to represent only a very insignificant rent-roll compared with other property of the family in England and the Lowlands of Scotland, which altogether did not embrace the tenth part of the amount of the Highland property. Uribol was simply a barren waste, worthy to be abandoned at

once to the fog and to the ever-encroaching sea. The money it yielded was to be counted by hundreds, whereas a few hundred fat acres in England brought in the revenue of thousands. What wonder that the Lords of Arranmore had from time immemorial busied their great brains with affairs of far more importance?

During the last years of the late lord's life, however, the southern estates had been dreadfully encumbered and mortgaged; and when my lord died, about a year before the opening of our story, the inheritor of the lands and title, an erratic nephew of the deceased, discovered that the Highland estate, though yielding so scanty an income, was really the only part of his inheritance which represented hard cash. Summoned hastily from Syria, where he had for some time been leading a vagabond life, the young laird went to London and saw his

uncle's affairs administered. Almost immediately he received through his solicitors several urgent communications from Peter Dougall, the factor, entreating him to adopt very different measures to those favoured by the deceased lord; but his only reply to these communications had been, 'My lord would inquire into the matter.'

Shortly afterwards a terrible outcry had been raised in the newspapers about certain extensive clearances in the district, and the country had rung from north to south with the sufferings of the exiles.

So much for the factor's relations with his employers. One word as to the nickname commonly applied to him behind his back, that of Peter na Croiche, or Peter of the Gallows. The story went that he had been, when a young man, a very great drunkard, and that one day, in a fit of *delirium tremens*, he had actually hung him-

self to a beam in his own byre, only being discovered by the merest chance, cut down, and with difficulty restored to life. The close acquaintance with death appeared to have done him good. He became a sober man, a strict attender to business, and as hard as iron. Only those who desired to provoke his wildest rage and deadliest animosity dared to refer to the great event of his life, and he had more than once hauled up before the Justice of the Peace, and had imprisoned, some daring spirits who, to provoke him, had addressed him publicly as 'Peter na Croiche.'

Mr. Macraw, the cattle-dealer, his companion in the inn-parlour, was a man whose ideas worked slowly, and no hand at an argument, so he only stared at the factor with his inflamed eyes, with an expression which, to a stranger, would have seemed

expressive of fiery rage, but in reality only indicated intellectual stupefaction.

‘Weel, weel, Mr. Tougall, you ken pest maybe. Shall we pe having another glass?’

‘No for me, Mr. Macraw. It’s o’er early in the day. See there, sir,’ he continued, standing at the window and looking forth, ‘there’s the vera man I was speaking about coming up the quay.’

It was not at first that Mr. Macraw, whose vision was none of the clearest, detected the person indicated—no other than Mr. Macdonald, who, shaking hands with all and sundry, was making his way up the crowded pier. Not far behind him lingered Mina, with her little hand laid gently on the arm of Koll Nicholson, who was listening to her, bareheaded, and in his shirt-sleeves.

‘That’s Meester Macdonald, indeed. He

is a braw figure of a man. What will he be doing at the fair?’

So spake Mr. Macraw in disconnected sentences. Dougall growled a reply.

‘I will tell you what he will be doing, Mr. Macraw. He will be setting man against man, and interfering all day with honest people’s business. He has come round in that thief-of-the-world Koll Nicholson’s smack, and I wish him and Koll Nicholson, and the smack and aal, were at the bottom of the sea together. Good-morning, Mr. Macraw.’

With these words, spoken with an amount of choler unusual in so self-possessed a man, the factor stalked from the house, leaving Mr. Macraw to pay for the liquor already consumed, and to order another supply for himself. At the head of the quay he passed the minister. They exchanged glances, but gave no other sign

of recognition. The sight of the good man who had interfered with so many of his plans affected the factor as a red rag is supposed to affect a bull, and he was driven doubly wild because he had no possible opportunity of revenging himself on an individual quite above the sphere of his machinations.

Who that has duly visited Storport in the dull season would have known it on the day we are describing! A quarter of a mile from the pier stretched a green flat island, and the space between island and pier was full of fishing-boats of all descriptions, anchored so closely together that they seemed roosting like birds on a bough. Everywhere the blue smoke of peat-fires ; from the shores of the loch, from the tiny islands, from the heights above the tower ; everywhere mud huts, tents, inverted boats, used by the myriad fishermen for dwellings.

The air was full of the smell of fish, the bones of boiled fish were scattered everywhere on the ground, fish were drying on the beach and on the stones above the village, the boats at the quay were full of fish newly caught—fish everywhere and the smell of fish, tempted by which a crowd of gulls, hundreds upon hundreds, were hovering and darting above Storport with discordant screams. Everywhere also were fishermen and fisherwomen in all costumes, and from all parts of the British Isles. From the cheery Isle of Man fisher, with his oilskin suit and sou'-wester, to the dull and dowie Hercules of the East Coast, wrapped in wool and flannel enough to suffocate an ox ; from the quick, shrewd girl attached to the East-country boat, and cooking for the men and mending their clothes, to the strapping women of all ages who earn their living by herring-gutting;

and live in all sorts of strange nooks ashore.

Everywhere close to the water's edge, and in the water, fish, fishermen, fishing-boats, wild women, nets, ropes, and oars—a confused, moving patchwork, which fatigued the eye and bewildered the brain.

Passing hastily among the crowd of human beings, one saw more magnificent specimens of male strength and symmetry, coupled with more picturesque variety of costume, than would readily be seen elsewhere under the circumstances. The women were not so handsome, but there were glorious creatures among them, 'weeds of glorious feature,' scarcely less attractive because they could put out almost masculine strength, if need be, and give and take those sort of jokes which are more pointed in their language than delicate in their meaning.

Through the crowd which besieged the quay walked Mr. Macdonald, his white head towering over all, and his face looking at once grave, benignant, and kind. Mingled up with the crowds of strange fishermen and fisherwomen were drovers and their dogs, mendicants, shepherds out for a holiday, farm-servants in gaudy finery, cattle-dealers with their pockets stuffed full of one-pound notes, and ragged cottars of the isles. Hand after hand was thrust out to grasp that of the clergyman; greeting after greeting was showered upon him; and many a kind word and respectful salutation was addressed to his adopted daughter, when she followed and took his arm, leaving Koll Nicholson to look after her with eyes full of tenderness and admiration.



CHAPTER XVIII.

FINE FEATHERS IN THE FAIR.

IN the bright grey light of the fine morning Mina Macdonald looked very pretty indeed. She was very simply attired, with little to distinguish her from ordinary well-to-do peasant women. Her hair was bound up in simple braids under a pretty straw hat, trimmed with bright ribbons. This was her only piece of finery. Her dress, her cloak, her stockings, were all home-woven, but the hat and its adornments had come from the south, and were a birthday gift.

Her boots, too, were dainty, though strong and fitting well on the shapely foot.

A pretty woman is like a sunbeam, and should set warmth and light wherever she goes. Certainly Mina did so as she walked on through the crowd by the clergyman's side.

She had left the wharf behind, and was ascending the road behind the inn, still greeted on every side with nods and smiles and 'good-days,' when suddenly she came face to face with Lawrance. He was dressed to-day like a seaman, in pilot-jacket and trousers, wearing a wide-awake hat, and smoking a cigar.

She had certainly no cause to look embarrassed, yet she started, blushed, and turned her eyes away. The next moment Lawrance was close up to her, shaking hands with her and with her uncle. After

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a few moments' talk, they walked on merrily together.

They were now on the declivity above Storport, on a road crowded with country people on foot and on horseback. It was obviously a gala-day, though there were no signs of booths or shows. The small, heathery knolls on every side of them were covered with black cattle, sheep, shepherds, drovers, and barking dogs—a perfect sea of bustle and commotion. On one stormy height a lantern-jawed, foxy-whiskered itinerant was preaching, to the obvious bewilderment of half-a-dozen urchins and a semi-tipsy shepherd. Along the winding country road, as far as eye can see, the people were coming in a thin stream ; troops of cattle driven by shouting dogs, and ever breaking from the track ; poor women leading their solitary cows to the market by straw ropes ; fat, red-cloaked peasant women

seated sideways on horses in a wooden framework, with their fat legs cased in coloured stockings, and thickly-booted, resting on a species of wooden tray; herd girls, red-complexioned, shock-haired, white-toothed, grinning from their straw-stuffed trusses on the backs of cows or oxen; tacks-men mounted on their sturdy ponies, and crofters toiling barefoot; groups of men, women, and children, gaily dressed, jolting in rude, springless carts behind old horses that creep along at the pace of snails. Across the flat country inland, as far as eye can see, nothing is to be observed but low, green land and small hillocks, broken up with innumerable lakes and stagnant lagoons. In the far distance peeps a spire, and still further, far as eye can see, a great rain-cloud is hanging over the Northern Sea.

It was scarcely a scene which a person used to the great world could enjoy save as

a patronising spectator, but it made the cheek of Mina go and come with unconcealed delight, and her eye wandered from group to group and from face to face, finding fresh objects of interest at every step. Lawrance strode on by her side, and glanced hither and thither carelessly enough.

‘This is really a very interesting scene,’ he observed, looking, however, very indifferent; ‘a most real and striking sort of picture. How I regret, Miss Mina, that I do not speak the Highland language; one misses so much when ignorant of the dialect of the country in which one travels. By the way,’ he added, addressing the minister, ‘is it true that the Gaelic speech is dying out?’

This was a question which appealed to Mr. Macdonald’s most passionate convictions or prejudices. He gave an emphatic negative.

‘As the language of mere commerce,’ he

observed, with some contempt, 'it may be obsolete in some quarters, for the Highlanders have to trade with men who do not understand the grand tongue, and we are bound to use an inferior form of speech. But in the ordinary conversation of life Gaelic is and will continue to be the language of the people ; it is more simple, more noble, more expressive, and it is, moreover, a language hallowed by immortal tradition and a glorious literature. In my own parish I do not encourage the natives to learn English. It is not expedient. I will even go so far as to say that I have found the knowledge of the Lowland language only the prelude to the practice of Lowland vices. Simplicity, honesty, hospitality, all go with the Gaelic ; all vanish when man forgets his mother tongue.'

This was the language of exaggeration,

but Macdonald spoke with the strongest feeling.

‘And you, Miss Mina,’ inquired Lawrance with a smile, ‘do you prefer the language of Ossian to that of Shakespeare?’

‘I ought to do so,’ Mina replied quietly, ‘since it is my native tongue;’ and she turned her head away, as if she did not care to be cross-questioned.

Lawrance now stopped short, and, holding out his hand, said :

‘I must leave you now ; I have some purchases to make, and must look after Calum, who is by this time busy at the tavern.’

‘Do you remain here during the day?’ asked the minister.

‘I do. I ran round in the *Jenny* to have a look at the fun, and I shall return to-night or to-morrow morning.’

‘Then, perhaps we may meet again in the course of the day.’

‘Yes,’ said Lawrance, ‘and, if we do, I trust your niece will go on board the *Jenny* and take another look at the creature she once saved from a watery grave. She’s not much of a ladies’ boat, but I’m sure she’ll try to look her best under the circumstances.’

So saying, and raising his hat cavalier-fashion, Lawrance turned away, and strolled back among the crowd towards the pier. Ere long he had lit a cigar, and was strolling along with his hands in his pockets, appearing to look at the people, but in reality plunged in deep meditation.

From group to group he lounged listlessly with an easy, good-humoured, patronising air. People, however, were far too much engaged with their own affairs to notice him, save now and then, when a pretty girl

CHAPTER XXII. THE INDIAN

THEY WERE NOT far from good-looking fire and smoke coming from the hills above the inn where the cattle were being groups of men and women were wrangling together and bargaining at the height of their voices. The dingy inn was now crowded with travellers and the excitement was increasing.

Instantly without Lawrence made his way towards the inn. As he approached the threshold on which it stood he saw in the distance a group of three—two gentlemen and one lady—who seemed strangely out of place in that wild scene. The men wore light tweed costumes, one of them a white Indian hat with a *puupuree*; the lady, who was tall and young, flitted a parasol.

They had just alighted from a dog-cart, and were looking at the dingy inn in some

‘Tourists, by Jove!’ thought Lawrance.
‘*Here* of all places in the world.’

So, giving them a still wider berth, he passed on to the shore, off which his boat was lying.

Had he been less absorbed in himself, or had he been a little nearer, he would have been astonished to see Miss Sedley (for it was she) gazing after him in utter astonishment.

‘Papa!’ she suddenly cried to her father, who was in eager conversation with the little baron.

‘Well, Ethel?’

‘Look at that gentleman—quick, or he will be gone!’

‘Well, what about him?’

‘I cannot be mistaken. It is——’

Here she paused and laughed merrily.

‘Who is he, Ethel?’

Ethel blushed and laughed again, then

she leant forward and whispered in her father's ear.

‘You don't mean it!’ he exclaimed. ‘Lord, what a place to meet in! And he didn't know us!’

‘He scarcely observed us, but I should recognise him anywhere. See! he is signalling to that little vessel in the bay.’

At this moment Calum, the pilot, issued somewhat unsteadily from the inn and passed the group. Miss Sedley called to him *en passant*.

‘Can you tell me who owns that small schooner?’ she said, with her sweetest smile. ‘Perhaps you belong to her?’

Calum, who, though well-seasoned with drink, was awe-struck at the presence of so fine a lady, took off his cap.

‘That'll be the *Jenny*, my leddy,’ he replied, ‘and I'm her pilot.’

‘And that gentleman?—see, he is turning and waving to you!’

‘That’s jest Mr. Lawrance, her owner. A fine gentleman he is, my leddy, and a gran’ sailor.’

‘Mr. Lawrance?—are you sure that is his name?’

‘Yes, my leddy.’

‘Has he no other?’

‘I never heard tell o’ anither. He’s up here to see the kintra, and he’s staying yonder amang the lochs o’ Uribol. We sailed the *Jenny* here the morn. But I maun rin—he’s crying on me. Good-bye, my leddy.’

And with no very steady gait he hastened down to the shore. Sir Charles Sedley looked at his daughter.

‘Then you’ve made a mistake, Miss Clever! It’s not——’

‘I have made no mistake,’ answered the

young lady, nodding her head. 'It's himself, papa!'

'But the man says——'

'I begin to anticipate something amusing. Don't say a word, but leave me to arrange matters my own way. He is here *incognito*; that is all.'

END OF VOL. I.







